


COOKING WITH WILD GAME

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VOLUME
6





"I FEEL THAT IT'S INCREDIBLY TASTY. AND SO, I WISH TO CONTINUE DOWN THE PATH I BELIEVE IN... I WOULD GREATLY APPRECIATE IT IF YOU WERE TO ACCOMPANY ME ON THAT JOURNEY."

A SILENCE WASHED OVER THE RITUAL HALL. AT FIRST I THOUGHT THAT WAS BECAUSE MOST OF THE PEOPLE PRESENT WERE STILL EATING, BUT NOBODY EVEN SEEMED TO BE MOVING. THE SUUN, THE RUU, AND THE CLANS UNDER THEM... EVEN THE WOMEN WHO MANNED THE STOVE AND THE HEADS OF THE SMALL CLANS ALL SEEMED TO BE HOLDING THEIR BREATH...

AND THEN, THAT SILENCE WAS SUDDENLY BROKEN.

"THE FOU CLAN STANDS IN AGREEMENT WITH THE CLAN HEAD OF THE FA."

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

VOLUME 6

**AT LONG LAST, THE CLAN HEAD
MEETING HELD BY THE SUUN.**



HERE WE GO!



BLOODY LEGS CAME
INTO VIEW...
THEN A BLOODY WAIST...
BLOODY STOMACH...
BLOODY ARMS...
BLOODY CHEST...
BLOODY NECK...
BLOODY FACE.

YAMIRU SUUN WAS STANDING
THERE WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A
SINGLE THREAD OF CLOTHING
ON HER BODY, COMPLETELY
SOAKED IN BLOOD.

"WILL YOU BECOME MY
HUSBAND AND SAVE THE SUUN
CLAN...? OR IF YOU CAN'T
STAND THE IDEA, FALL TO RUIN
ALONGSIDE US...?"

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Prologue: A Very Busy Day Off

It was the morning after our ten days of work in the post town had come to a close.

I was in the vacant house at the Ruu settlement, ecstatically staring at the two cooking tools I had bought just yesterday: a cooking knife from Sym and an iron tray from Jagar.

The knife was for cutting vegetables, and had a blade length of 20 centimeters and a width of eight centimeters. The blade was sharpened from only one side, but unlike my cooking knife or the one meant for meat, the blade was rectangular rather than tapering off. It really did remind me of the usuba vegetable knives from the Kansai region in terms of design.

The blade itself was straight, and when I lowered it down to the cutting board it lined up perfectly, making it incredibly useful for chopping vegetables. The knack for how to handle the taper of the edge was different than what I was used to, though, so I had to be extra careful. After all, the cutting edge was so thin that it would be quite easy to chip. Still, it had such a fantastic cut that it was well worth the price of 18 white coins.

Then, there was the iron tray.

It came from Jagar, which was famous for its iron production. Apparently, the majority of the weapons for sale in Genos came from there.

It was 70 centimeters wide, 50 centimeters long, and six millimeters thick. It had a three centimeter-high lip around all four sides, as well as handles on the left and right, with no further ornamentation. That made for an incredibly simple design, but I just couldn't get enough of its spartan

charm.

For iron cookware, it is necessary to season it by baking an oil coating onto the surface, to provide a natural finish that protects against corrosion. I already took care of that yesterday, so now its dark surface had a slick shine to it.

By now, it had been a month and a half since I started living at the forest's edge. I had gotten by all that time cooking everything in an iron pot, but having a tray would be incredibly useful. For example, it was sure to make baking patties and poitan a lot more efficient.

On top of that, the pots I usually used had a thickness of around one centimeter, so they may well have weighed over 30 kilos each. This tray, though, was 12 or 13 kilos at most. That also made it incredibly handy to use.

Since it was thinner, it also stored less heat. But that just meant the pots I was using were too thick, and the six millimeter-thick tray should be able to handle plenty of volume. So for now, it was already a rather handy item, and in the future it could help expand the breadth of recipes I could prepare. And that thought made it all the harder to stop smiling.

The beautiful cooking knife from Sym was like a work of art, while the iron tray from Jaguar was a big bundle of practicality. I just kept on staring at them shining in the morning sun, never growing bored.

"What in the world are you doing, Asuta...?" Ai Fa questioned, having gone to the washing place first thing in the morning.

"Hey, that was quick. How's your left arm doing?" I asked, turning her way.

"Well, the pain is completely gone, but it seems to have lost quite a bit of strength. I may be able to handle a human opponent, but it would be foolhardy to go up against a giba like this." As she replied, she slowly bent and stretched her left arm, free for the first time in six days. She had been recovering ever since she dislocated her left elbow in the

middle of hunting. "If I push myself before my strength returns, I may dislocate it again. And so, I'll need to keep an eye on it for a few more days... So, what were you doing, Asuta?"

"Ah, nothing in particular. I was just kind of in a daze admiring these guys I bought yesterday."

"Hmm...?" Ai Fa questioned while tilting her head a bit, then she walked over and sat down beside me.

Her slightly damp blonde hair was done up in its usual complex style. She also looked quite charming with it simply hanging down around her shoulders, but this practical hairstyle really did suit her best.

"So while I was cleansing my body and helping out with the washing work, you were just sitting here like this the whole time?"

"Yeah. This is my first time buying cooking tools with money I've earned myself, so I just feel really attached to them, somehow."

I must have been feeling sort of like a doting old man seeing his grandchild for the first time.

Ai Fa started to frown, looking a bit upset.

"Asuta, you..."

"Yeah?"

"No, it's nothing..."

"What's up? It's rare for you to stop saying something partway through."

"Yes, but it's nothing."

I turned my whole body to face Ai Fa.

"I'm sure that's not true. And besides, now I'm curious. If something's on your mind, then don't hold back. Just come out and say it."

"But even if you are a member of my house, it's not as if I can just cast aside all decorum. So it really is nothing."

"Ah, but now I'm getting even more curious! Didn't we promise not to hide how we feel from each other just a little while ago? We've got all sorts of differences in how we think

and feel about stuff, so isn't it best if we're just completely open about everything so that we can understand one another?"

Hearing that fervent speech, Ai Fa frowned even deeper.

"It's nothing to worry so much over. It's just... I didn't want to cause you any unpleasant thoughts."

"It's fine. I mean, you told me if I said anything unpleasant you would just give me a beating, so I should go ahead and speak my mind, right?"

"You intend to give me a beating...?"

"As if I could manage something like that even if I wanted to."

"You won't get angry...?"

"If it's that awful, then we'll just have to talk it over until we're both okay with it."

"I see. Very well. It would seem that you were in the right in this instance."

Ai Fa stayed seated cross-legged but straightened up her back and shot me a truly solemn look.

"I thought that you were just a little bit creepy."

"..."

"Are you mad?"

"No, not at all."

I did feel a bit like I was about to cry, though.

"By that, I meant that I felt you were being just a tiny bit creepy, the way that you were staring fondly at tools made of iron and wood like one would a human being..."

"Ah, no, you got the meaning across just fine, so you don't need to pour salt on the wound."

"Really...? Are you angry, then?"

"No, not at all."

"I see," Ai Fa replied with a nod.

With that, she broke out in an innocent little smile.

"In that case, it seems it really was the right choice to say something. I feel like I've gotten a weight off of my chest, Asuta."

I shot a halfhearted smile back, figuring that was what mattered most. Even if I felt down now, if her mood brightened up in the process, then I'd consider that a perfectly fair tradeoff.

"And your expression seems to have brightened up quite a bit. You looked like you were terribly deep in thought last night."

"Ah, yeah. I want to deal with all the problems we're facing, but I realized the only way to do that is to handle the tasks in front of me one by one."

As far as those tasks went... In just three days, we would be heading to the Suun settlement to man the stove for the clan head meeting. And the plan was to spend the days from now till then practicing.

The Suun clan were the ones to lead the people of the forest's edge, but they also had earned themselves quite a poor reputation. They kept the reward money from Genos all to themselves and used it to fool around, shirked their responsibility to hunt giba, and acted outrageously in the post town. Plus, since they colluded with the Genos nobles, even if they acted up in the post town, their crimes were never questioned. That alone made it impossible to think they would be the ones leading the honest and brave people of the forest's edge.

And on top of that, I had heard a particularly disturbing tale from Milano Mas. According to him, his brother-in-law and good friend was murdered by a person of the forest's edge. And yet, no one was ever charged with that crime, which was a thought so awful that it was hard to believe. There was no guarantee at all that the culprit was from the Suun clan. And yet, I couldn't help but feel more and more suspicious of them.

As for the question of what I could do about them... For now, I just had to do my best to be prepared for the clan head meeting.

"Well then, I'll go wash off too. I'm really busy today,

right from the start of the morning on to the end, after all.”

“Right. First off is teaching the women your cooking, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Then after that I’ve got plenty of prep work left for tomorrow, as well as deciding on what I’ll be making for the inn to serve. It seems like I’ll be busy working for the whole day.”

“Seriously, it’s enough to make me feel jealous...” Ai Fa muttered with a slight pout. “All I have to do is gather firewood. It really is agony, not being able to head into the forest despite my body already being partway healed.”

“Hey, don’t go doing anything reckless, alright?” I said with concern in my tone, only causing Ai Fa to pout further.

“Do I really look that foolish? Resting when needed is another of a hunter’s important tasks.”

“Right, sorry. You just had a really discontented look on your face.”

“I certainly am discontent... But I only show such faces around you, so stop grumbling about it.”

I really did wish that Ai Fa would open up to more people... But hearing that made me feel so happy that I was worried my poor heart wouldn’t be able to take it.

“Thanks for that, first thing in the morning...”

“What exactly are you thanking me for?”

“Ah, i-it’s nothing! Well then, I better go clean myself off before getting to work!”

With that, I began a day off that was sure to be no less busy than any work day.



“...And so, this’ll be a study session to prepare for the clan head meeting. For the time being, I’ve tried to craft a plan for how we’ll handle things on the day of.”

The study session was ultimately split up into two groups, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon.

If too many gathered at once, I wouldn't be able to pay each of them the proper amount of attention, plus it felt awkward summoning the Rutim women first thing in the morning, so that was how it played out.

There would be eight women helping me for the clan head meeting. From the main Ruu house, there were Mia Lea, Vina, Reina, and Lala Ruu. Then there were Sheera and Tari Ruu from the branch families. And finally, Ama Min and Morun Rutim from the main Rutim house.

Tari Ruu was Sheera Ruu's mother. I felt bad about taking the talented mother and daughter pair from Shin Ruu's house at the same time, leaving them without anyone to man the stove, but apparently some other women from the branch families would cover for them. And it seemed that ever since Sheera and Tari Ruu helped out with the Rutim banquet, their cooking skills had improved remarkably, which is what had earned them such a strong recommendation from Mia Lea Ruu.

I had only met Morun Rutim once before, but she was Ama Min Rutim's sister-in-law, making her Gazraan Rutim's little sister and Dan Rutim's daughter. She resembled her father, with a healthy plumpness to her build, and she was an energetic and charming young woman.

Currently, five of those eight were gathered in front of me. The three older sisters from the main Ruu house, Mia Lea Ruu, and lastly Sheera Ruu.

Mia Lea and Sheera Ruu would be joining in the afternoon study session, too. That was because I would be having them help take charge as part of our small unit.

As I looked over the group of five reliable faces, I continued on, "Our goal will be to pound cooking techniques into the Suun clan's women, so I'd like us to serve as examples while letting them do as much as possible. It'll sort of be like a recreation of when I manned the Ruu house's stove for the second time."

"Ah, you mean the celebratory banquet before the Rutim

wedding, when you fed our clan head steak? We did do most of the actual cooking that time, didn't we?" Mia Lea Ruu said with a large nod, looking just as lively as always. "But this time around, we'll be serving about as many people as with the wedding, right? Will that method really work?"

"I think it'll be alright. It's not like what we're serving will be as elaborate as with the wedding, plus we don't need to worry about how we bring everything out... Anyway, I was thinking that we would go with myamuu giba, steak, baked poitan, and giba meat and aria soup."

"Hmm, you're not going to add other vegetables to the soup?" Lala Ruu asked.

"That's right. After all, the cost of the ingredients will have to come out of our profits. We're already using myamuu and fruit wine in addition to aria and poitan, so I thought we'd keep it simple this time around."

That was all based on the agreement I had come to with Yamiru Suun.

And it seemed the payment of forty giba worth of horns and tusks wouldn't be prepared by the Suun clan, but rather collected from the clan heads coming to the meeting.

It was a truly despicable setup, but since we had our own plan at work, we couldn't really go and complain about it.

Our intention was to use the opportunity to stress the importance of delicious food and abundance for the forest's edge. No matter what the Suun clan was plotting, we had to emphasize the validity of our points.

"If we went and created elaborate dishes, they may feel it's only natural they tasted good. But if we use dishes that anyone can create, that will make our argument all the more persuasive."

"Hmm, I see you've given this a lot of thought," Lala Ruu said with a shrug of her shoulders that seemed to say, "Do whatever you want."

I just shot her a smile, then continued on with my explanation, "So my plan is on the day of, we'd prepare

everything in the order of baked poitan, giba soup, and then the meat dishes. Rather than getting everything ready simultaneously, we would all be making the same dishes one by one in order. And so, there shouldn't be any issues with the baked poitan or soup, but I'd like everyone to get comfortable enough with the meat dishes to teach them to the Suun clan women."

Then, I glanced over at Sheera Ruu, who had been standing there silently.

"And this is unrelated to the clan head meeting, but I'd like you to be able to perfectly handle making myamuu giba on your own, Sheera Ruu."

"Huh? But why...?"

"Right, well, we're running the stalls in the post town again starting tomorrow, so I want you to be able to manage the myamuu giba stall even when I'm not around."

Two days after the clan head meeting, on the 12th day of the blue month, I would start having to prepare meals meant for dinner at The Great Southern Tree. But at least for now, I just didn't have enough time. If I tried to prepare those meals after finishing up business with the stall for the day, I would be way too late getting back home. And naturally, that would cut into my time to prepare for the next day.

"I'd like to head over to The Great Southern Tree around when the sun is past its peak and the giba burgers sell out. And during that time, I'd want you to take charge of the myamuu giba stall, Sheera Ruu."

"Could I really handle something like that...? Managing the heat is very important with that dish, isn't it?"

"Yeah, if you overcook it, the meat will get hard, and the taste of the juices and the like will get too overpowering. But I believe that within a few days, you'll be able to manage it no problem."

"You really think so...?"

"I do. And I already discussed with Mia Lea Ruu about paying you twice as much when you can manage that."

Sheera Ruu turned to Mia Lea Ruu with a clear look of surprise.

Mia Lea Ruu shot a big satisfied smile back and ruffled the nearby Lala's hair.

"I asked Lala and Vina if they'd be fine with it, too. They said that you were the only one who could manage something like that, so they're fine leaving it up to you. I mean, they're not quite that good at manning the stove, you know."

"Oh, be quiet! It's just that Sheera Ruu's way *too* good at it! There's no way that we could make food that tastes as good as Asuta's like that!"

"That's true... I want to give my all too, but I can't imagine having the courage to cook the meat for that stall..."

There was earnest admiration shining in the two girls' eyes as they chimed in.

Then, the one person who had stayed silent the whole time opened her mouth.

"Mother, I'd like to think that I have some degree of skill manning the stove by now... But will it still just be Vina and Lala heading into town to work from tomorrow on?" the second daughter, Reina Ruu, questioned.

She was holding her hands together in front of her chest and staring at her mother, looking like she was pleading.

Mia Lea Ruu shot her a rather troubled smile back.

"The one to choose Vina at the start was our clan head. And if both you and Vina were gone, we would fall behind on the work around the house a bit, right? On top of that... I think it would be best if Vina were the one by Asuta's side, at least until we know a bit more about what the Suun clan is plotting. After all, no matter what you say, your big sister is the best at handling people."

"But..."

"For example, if the Suun men get drunk and start throwing around complaints, Vina would be the best to deal

with that, right? If it looks like the Suun clan will stop coming after Asuta following this clan head meeting, then Donda may change his mind. So just be patient a bit longer till that time comes.”

“Alright...” Reina replied, puffing up her cheeks just a bit.

Vina Ruu had a really complicated jumble of emotions on her face as she turned away and started fidgeting with the tips of her chestnut-colored hair.

And as for Sheera Ruu, she was facing me directly, filled with resolve.

“Okay, if you’re putting that much trust in me, then I’d like to try to live up to that. And so, I’ll give it my all.”

“Thank you... Well then, shall we go ahead and get this study session started?”



After that, I managed to keep things under control and bring the morning study session to a close. As I stepped out of the kitchen for the first time in around two hours, I stretched out both my arms. Outside, I found Rimee Ruu and Granny Tito Min drying out pico leaves while they chopped firewood.

“Hey there, Rimee Ruu. Is Ai Fa still not back yet?”

“Yeah, but I think she’ll be back soon.”

Ai Fa had headed out to the edge of the forest in order to gather firewood for our stalls.

There was still a good bit of time left till the sun would hit its peak, but just as I was wondering what I would do with myself, someone unexpected approached: the eldest son of the main Ruu house, Jiza Ruu.

“Asuta, if you have the time, I would like to talk with you for a bit.”

“With me...?”

Jiza Ruu had more or less sunken into the shadows lately, but now he was saying he wanted to have a talk... To be

honest, I had trouble imagining this was heading anywhere good.

Mia Lea Ruu had followed after me out of the kitchen, and was looking at her son with a bit of a doubtful look, too.

“How unusual for you to come talk with Asuta, Jiza... You aren’t dissatisfied with our clan head’s decision, are you?”

“The clan head’s decisions are absolute. As his eldest son, do you really believe I would oppose his wishes?”

As always, his expression alone remained perfectly calm.

Mia Lea Ruu gave a little sigh as she stared into his narrow eyes, then said, “You and Asuta both have plenty of work to take care of, so don’t go causing each other unnecessary worry, alright?”

“Right,” Jiza Ruu responded with a nod, then he started walking along the side of the house. Naturally, I had no choice but to follow.

“It feels like it’s been quite some time since we’ve been able to have a proper talk, Asuta...”

“That’s true. It may actually have been since the morning of the Rutim banquet.”

“Even so, that’s less than 20 days ago... And yet, things have changed to a dizzying degree since then.”

Jiza Ruu stopped in place and turned to face me. He had no blades or cloak on his person. He was just in his everyday cloth clothing. Still, considering the intimidating frame he was blessed with, he could surely get rid of me without a blade if he wanted to. Personally, I felt the need to be just as careful with him as I did when dealing with the Suun clan.

“You’ve firmly established yourself as a central figure at the forest’s edge. When you move, so does the future of our people... That is how it feels to me.”

“I don’t agree with that. I’m of course aware that I’ve been the trigger for all sorts of uproar... However, whether that’s a good or bad thing, it hasn’t been through my power alone. It’s because Ai Fa, Gazraan Rutim, and Donda Ruu were there that someone like me was able to have an effect

on the future of the forest's edge."

"I'm not so sure about that. At the very least, I don't believe the situation we see today would ever have come to pass if you were not around."

I could feel an invisible pressure slowly pressing down on me from above. That pressure feared by his siblings felt like a lead weight that couldn't be seen.

"That may be so, but I think that's true of the others as well. If any of the people who helped me weren't around, we would definitely find ourselves in a completely different situation. Isn't that just the way the world is?"

"You've changed, Asuta..." Jiza Ruu said in a low tone. "In the past, you gave off a far weaker impression. It was as if you didn't know yourself, and so there was a risk of you recklessly throwing around your strength."

"Right..."

"Now, however, you not only seem to understand your power, but also intend to employ it to influence the forest's edge."

Somehow, it seemed like Jiza Ruu's large body had grown even bigger. And the pressure was steadily growing heavier, bit by bit.

"You are dangerous. Probably even more so than that Kamyua Yoshu man from the city of stone... As a foreigner with the power to shift our future from among us, you are the most dangerous person I know."

"Then you still can't see me as a member of the forest's edge?" I replied, feeling not so much afraid as overcome by an overwhelmingly oppressive feeling in the air. "I honestly wish to become a true person of the forest's edge, from the depths of my heart. But I still feel nervous about trying to do something so great when I've been here for such a short period of time, so I've opened myself up to Ai Fa, Gazraan Rutim, and Donda Ruu so that I can choose the best possible path forward... Are you unhappy with the current relationship between the Ruu clan, the post town, and the

Suun, Jiza Ruu?"

"If you ask me that... then I have to say I am, of course. I believe we people of the forest's edge should be the ones to decide our own future."

"Hmm... Then how about thinking of me as a tool Donda Ruu and Gazraan Rutim and the rest are using to blaze a trail forward? I still feel that way a bit myself..."

"Even if you are a tool, it isn't the Ruu or Rutim who are using you."

Jiza Ruu's eyes remained narrowed, but I felt a gleam of darkness come from them. It was a piercing light, like the tip of a jet black blade.

"The one using you is the head of the Fa clan. Now that I consider it, perhaps we have yielded the fate of the forest's edge to the hands of a clan head with no other families under her."

"You're mistaken. I'm not just honoring Ai Fa's opinion. And on top of that, Ai Fa isn't acting out of personal greed, but rather a desire for a better future for her people, right?"

That was exactly why she made the decision to rely on the Ruu and Rutim, in spite of her own feelings on the matter. And on the day after that, she got so worried about it that she broke out in a fever... But in the end, she decided to follow the path laid out in Gazraan Rutim's words, believing them to be correct.

That was why I felt that what we were doing was trying to open wide a new future for the forest's edge, with the Ruu, Rutim, and Fa supporting one another to get there... So why couldn't Jiza Ruu think that way too?

"...If Ai Fa had married Darmu two years back, we never would have fallen into such a state," Jiza Ruu stated in a perfectly calm tone. "Or if Jiba and Rimee had not formed a bond with her, or if she had never met you in the forest..."

"I feel blessed for those events, but you think of them as nothing but misfortune?" I questioned, strength filling my gaze as I bore the invisible pressure pushing down on me.

“In that case... I find that very sad.”

It was like I could feel electricity crackling in the air. If I let my guard down, my knees would probably give out on me.

This certainly was just as intense as squaring off with a raging Donda Ruu.

But while Donda Ruu had created that pressure by letting his anger erupt, I couldn't sense any emotion at all from Jiza Ruu.

I didn't sense any personal feelings like anger or hatred, but something even more alien to me... Whether it was a sense of duty, or belonging to his people, or pride as a hunter, I could sense a fragment of that coming from him.

But at any rate, the pressure from him was overwhelming. I was just barely able to hold on against it, rather than crumbling.

Just how much time had passed...?

At any rate, my confrontation with Jiza Ruu was cut short when Ai Fa called out from behind his back, “What were you doing in a place like this, Asuta?”

With that, the pressure coming off of Jiza Ruu seemed to just poof away.

Turning her way, I saw Ai Fa with a bundle of firewood tied together with vines on her back.

“If you've got nothing to do, then help me. You'll need even more firewood than yesterday for tomorrow, right?”

“Y-Yeah, that's true... Got it, I'll give you a hand.”

As Ai Fa approached, Jiza Ruu gave her a bow and then turned back towards me.

“Well then, please excuse me. I really was glad to get a chance to talk to you for the first time in a while.”

I was unable to come up with a clever response, so I just gave a little nod back.

With that, Jiza Ruu left and Ai Fa took his place.

“Really, just what are you doing, Asuta?” Ai Fa questioned, a scary look on her face. “I've never seen such

bloodlust coming off that eldest son before. You shouldn't be alone with that sort of man when I'm not around."

"B-But it's pretty hard to turn someone like that down when they say they want to talk, right?"

"Even so, refuse him. It's impossible to read what he's feeling, so even I don't know how to properly stay on guard around him."

Ai Fa brought her face even closer, to the point that the tips of our noses were practically touching, and stared into my eyes.

"Hmm... You don't seem to have cowered despite being hit with such bloodlust, though. You may be terribly weak in muscles, but you seem to have courage to spare."

"Hey, if you're going to insult me, then do that, and if you're going to praise me, then just praise me. Pick one or the other."

"I see. Then let me praise you."

With that, Ai Fa's forehead bumped into mine.

"There aren't many men of the forest's edge who could retain their composure after being hit by that eldest son's bloodlust. You certainly are cheeky for a powerless chef, Asuta."

"Hey, like I said—"

"I'm praising you, so be proud."

Then, Ai Fa showed me a vibrant smile.

"With your guts, the men of the Suun clan should be nothing to fear. I feel a little bit calmer now about the coming clan head meeting... Well then, let's go gather some firewood, Asuta. I have to get my weakened body back in shape too, after all."

Chapter 1: The Corrupt Clan

1

I'd almost say nothing of particular note happened till the day of the clan head meeting, but I couldn't quite go that far.

The day after the study session at the Ruu house, we were open again for business in the post town, and we ended up selling through all 200 meals we had prepared. The day after that, things slowed down a bit and we just prepared 170 meals, but we still managed to sell them all.

It seemed like the irregular schedule of one day off, two days of business, and then two more days off had an unusual effect on my customers' purchasing habits. After all, before this, we were having a bit left over when we prepared 150 meals.

As always, the majority of my customers came from the east and south, but my giba cooking was definitely becoming a topic of discussion throughout the post town. And if we manage to sell it through inns from here on out, too, then that should help raise its reputation even further.

No matter what the Suun clan might have been planning, I had to make this business a success.

As I worked away with that feeling firmly planted in my mind, the eighth and ninth days of the blue month flowed on by, and the day of the clan head meeting arrived at last.



"The Suun settlement sure is far..." I whispered to Ai Fa as we walked along the yellow trodden path at the forest's

edge.

As she moved along gracefully like a wild leopard, Ai Fa stealthily whispered back, "The Suun settlement is the cornerstone of the north, while the Ruu settlement has a similar position in the south. It's only natural that it feels like such a long distance."

The settlement at the forest's edge was long and thin, stretching north to south. It seemed to have ended up that way because it was sandwiched between Mount Morga on the east, and the cleared-away land of the Genos domain to the west.

The Suun settlement was far to the north, then there were numerous houses belonging to small clans like the Fa along the way, and the Ruu and the Rutim were all the way to the south. From the position of the sun, we must have been walking for two hours by this point, but I still wasn't really seeing any change in scenery.

"Hmm... So on the night of the Rutim wedding, those guys from the Suun clan walked all the way down this long path just to mess with everyone?" I whispered into Ai Fa's ear.

She replied, "Right," with a nod.

"If they're not properly carrying out their work as hunters, then they must have plenty of time on their hands. Hmph, the thought of it makes my blood boil."

"Yeah, seriously. If they've got that much time to spare, then they should go hunt a giba or two."

"By the way, Asuta..."

"Hmm? What is it, Ai Fa?"

"Why are you saying everything so quietly?"

So she had just been going along with it without even knowing why?

"There's no deep reason for it. It's just, don't you feel kind of hesitant about openly chatting away, considering the mood?"

We weren't exactly heading to the Suun settlement on

our own, as we met up with the Ruu and the clans under them along the way.

There were six clans under the Ruu, bonded to them by blood: the Rutim, Lea, Min, Maam, Ririn, and Muufa. For the meeting, each of the clan heads were accompanied by one man from their family. Then there were the women who were manning the stove with me, bringing our group up to 24 in total.

Plus, the men were an elite group of fearless fighters, making for an inspiring sight. They all must have been there for the Rutim wedding, but the only ones I was acquainted with were Donda and Darmu Ruu, as well as Dan Rutim.

They had split up the ingredients for tonight's dinner and were carrying them. Even if none of them grumbled about it in the least, I still felt much obliged to them.

"Man, I'm feeling kinda sleepy, somehow..." I suddenly heard a loud voice proclaim from behind.

When I turned around, I saw what looked to be the youngest member of the group of men giving a big yawn.

"It's been a while since I've gotten up this early. Donda Ruu, could I take a bit of a nap once we get to the Suun settlement?"

"Do as you please," Donda Ruu bluntly responded.

"Thanks, that helps a lot. And well, I'll wake up right away if there's any sort of commotion, so no worries there... Hmm, what are you looking at, Fa clan chef?"

"Ah, sorry."

"I wasn't going for an apology. I was just asking what you were looking at."

He didn't sound especially annoyed, but his face didn't look that calm, either.

As I was trying to figure out what to say, he hastened his pace and came up beside me.

"Now that I think of it, I still haven't heard your name. Mine's Rau Lea, so what's yours, chef of the Fa house?"

"Ah, my name is Asuta."

He looked like he may be younger than me, but I still decided it was best to speak to him politely. Or at least, that was what I was thinking, but then he shot me a bit of an annoyed look.

“I’m 17. How old are you, Asuta?”

“Oh, I’m also 17.”

“In that case, don’t worry about speaking all politely. Just talk normally, okay?”

For whatever reason, he was voicing the exact same complaint as Yumi.

Still, this youth had some serious presence. His long, pale, nearly golden hair was tied behind his neck. His eyes were a light blue, he had a prominent nose, and his lips were thin. He looked a bit more mature than Ludo Ruu and had a kind of androgynous face, but he was wearing a pretty wild expression.



Looking at him, I'd say he was a bit taller than me, and also on the skinny side. And yet despite his looks and his young age, he felt just as impressive as the men around him.

"Well, I didn't really get any of that stuff Gazraan Rutim was saying about you doing business in the post town. But since the Suun clan are causing you trouble, I'll lend you as much help as you need."

"Right, thank you very much."

"I told you to talk normally..."

"Ah, perhaps it's because I've started doing business in the post town, but I've started finding it easier to talk that way."

"I see. Then in that case, each time you talk all polite, I'll slug you one."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"So you're really the Fa clan's chef?" Rau Lea asked, bringing his face in close. "You're the one who sharply chastised the Suun sons when they came barging into the wedding banquet, right? You look like a totally different person now, though."

"Ah, you see, I kind of lost my cool a bit back then."

"Hmm... Then you should lose it today, too. If you show any weakness to the Suun clan, they'll be sure to take advantage and do as they please."

He really seemed to look at things in the complete opposite of the way I did. After all, in my mind, it was important to make sure you stayed calm and composed in a dangerous situation.

"By the way, Asuta, Gazraan Rutim taught our Lea clan how to bloodlet and dissect a giba. That certainly does make the meat taste good, but it's still far from the food you served at the banquet. Just how exactly do you make that soft meat?"

"Ah, do you mean the hamburger? That's made by chopping up meat and then balling it back together... But it's a little hard to describe with words alone. The Ruu and

Rutim women are familiar with how to make it by now, so I guess it would be best to learn from them,” I said, taking care not to be too formal so as not to get hit.

“In that case, Ama Min Rutim, teach the Lea women how to make it. I want to be able to eat that in my house,” Rau Lea said, looking back her way.

Ama Min Rutim was carrying a bag stuffed with vegetables on her back like everyone else as she walked along, and she politely bowed to Rau Lea in response.

“Very well. I’m not terribly skilled at making it myself, but I would certainly like to polish my skills alongside the Lea women.”

“Ama Min Rutim, how old are you...?”

“Ah, I’m 17 years old, Rau Lea.”

“Then don’t use such polite language. Like I told Asuta, just talk normally.”

“Ah, no. As one under the Ruu clan, I couldn’t possibly speak impolitely to the head of the main Lea house.”

Wait, this guy is the head of the main Lea house...?

“All the women started talking like that when I became the clan head. Even if you work the stove, you’re still technically a man, so you better still talk normally, alright, Asuta?”

It seemed like I was steadily growing closer to this difficult-to-handle youth.

I tried looking over Ai Fa’s way, but naturally my clan head was facing away and feigning ignorance.

“Ooh, what’s this? So the Lea clan head is fond of hamburger? I wouldn’t say that’s bad, but the tastiest is the rib meat, right?” the Rutim clan head butted in.

His potbelly bobbed along as he quickly approached. I wish I could say this would be my salvation... but that didn’t seem likely.

“Rib meat, huh? That’s pretty darn tasty too, of course, but don’t you feel the bones make it more of a pain to eat?”

“What are you saying?! Biting it off the bone makes it

even more delicious! So much so that I'd prefer to eat giba legs with the bones, too!"

That sounds like it would be a pain to cook through. Still, if I polished my skill at baking in a covered pan a bit more, that probably wouldn't be impossible.

"Besides, it's mostly women and children who like hamburger. I respect that you're serving as clan head at such a young age, but it seems like you're still a bit of a kid, huh?" Dan Rutim said with a hearty chuckle, while Rau Lea looked openly annoyed.

"Are you trying to pick a fight between the Rutim and the Lea? You're being incredibly rude, treating a hunter like me as a child."

"Then just stop complaining and eat your rib meat. That's the perfect dish for a hunter."

Dan Rutim then completely ignored Rau Lea's brewing anger and turned to shoot me a goggle-eyed look.

"Asuta! I'm definitely going to get to eat rib meat tonight, right? That thin myamuu meat dish is good too, but it's not as delicious as ribs!"

I see, so Ama Min and Morun Rutim must have showed off their new skills at home right away after learning how to make myamuu giba during the study session three days back.

That was all well and good, but I couldn't help but say "Huh?" with a tilt of my head. "The Rutim clan's supposed to be providing some meat for today. And there should be ribs in with that, right?"

"No clue. Now that you mention it, I think Gazraan may have said something about that, but I was sleepy so it just went in one ear and out the other."

"I see..."

"I hate the idea of letting those Suun bastards eat such delicious food, but well, if it helps improve their rotten characters even just a bit, then I guess I can accept it! I'll give them a firm kick in the rear and tell them if they wanna

eat tasty meat, then they'll do their jobs and hunt giba!"

"Ah, no, could I ask you to be as peaceful about things as possible...?"

"Hmm? What's that worried face for? Saying I'd kick them in the rear is just an expression. You don't think I'm that short tempered, do you?"

Despite his statement, I gave a stealthy sigh. I couldn't feel at ease in the least considering I had seen how angry he got with the Suun clan back at the wedding banquet.

"If they get all hotheaded and injure you, though, then even I don't know what I'll do," Dan Rutim said with a hearty guffaw, only for his jovial expression to shift into a more hunter-like one in an instant. "I don't care if we end up at war with the Suun clan, but you're the one person we can't afford to lose. Of course, you marrying into their clan is totally out of the question to start with, but more importantly than all that, you just better not die on us, alright?"

Dan Rutim apparently had no interest in our business in the post town. He didn't even seem to understand in the least what Ai Fa, Gazraan Rutim, and I were saying about bringing prosperity to the forest's edge. And yet, Gazraan Rutim said that when he informed his father that the Suun clan may be targeting me, he apparently flew into such a rage that it seemed like he was about to go storming off to the Suun settlement then and there.

When I heard that, I honestly felt embarrassed that I had pegged him as loving the taste of ribs but not caring that much about me personally.

With such thoughts in the back of my mind, I replied, "Right, thank you," only for Dan Rutim to laugh and slap me on the back.

"Well, in the kitchen the women will protect you, and we'll keep an eye on you the rest of the time! So you don't have to worry about it as you go and cook us up a delicious meal!"

I could feel a great deal of affection in his words of encouragement. That said, I think I heard my ribs creak from that slap, but at the very least nothing seemed to break.

“Hmph. The Suun clan themselves are nothing special. The ones we have to watch out for are the clans under them. A wimpy-looking guy like you could never put up a fight against them, so you better make sure not to get on their bad side even if things start going wrong.”

Rau Lea may have had a sharp tongue, but he was still saying that out of concern.

It seemed the clans under the Ruu were actually a lot more friendly to me and Ai Fa than I had been thinking. None of them aside from Rau Lea had talked to me, and they all had serious looks on their faces, but none of them looked like they were annoyed at the extra work.

And on top of their basic natures, we were all thinking we wouldn't just go along with the Suun clan's plotting, making it feel like me and Ai Fa fit right in.

Maybe the incident at the Rutim banquet Rau Lea had mentioned was another big reason for that, too. When those three idiot Suun sons came barging in, all of the men present were clearly filled with rage. And those men naturally included the ones now moving together with us.

Having a common enemy strengthened the bonds within a group. Perhaps that effect reached all the way to me and Ai Fa, too.

I'd certainly feel grateful if that was the case.

There was no mistaking that.

We may not have been related in the least, but we had a shared hatred of the Suun clan, so we should all get along just fine.

As that thought ran through my head, Donda Ruu mumbled in a low voice from the front of the group, “I can see it...”

I faced back front in a hurry and held my breath just a bit. There was a rather hard-to-describe building there,

hidden behind the treetops. No, “building” may be giving it too much credit. Right in the middle of a cleared-out space was what looked like a hill made out of dried grass piled up high. It called to mind the sort of pit dwellings you would expect from back in the Paleolithic Age.

The scale was absolutely unbelievable, though. The shape was like a bowl that had been flipped over, but its diameter had to be over 20 meters. It looked a good bit flattened, but the top of the bowl came up high enough that there would probably be room for a second floor.

As for the entrance, it was a dark hole gaping wide open. There was a roof that looked like a tri-cornered hat atop the bowl, and there was what looked to be a rectangular hole for ventilation in it.

The structure itself looked quite crude, but it still stood as a real testament to the power they held that they were able to make such a massive building at the forest’s edge.

“That’s the Suun clan’s ritual hall,” Ai Fa explained.

Apparently, that was where today’s clan head meeting would be held.

There were also a number of wooden buildings constructed in a familiar manner all around that suspicious-looking ritual hall. There had to be over ten of them in total.

“Welcome to the Suun settlement...” a single man greeted, staggering up to us. He was an older man with his grey hair combed down the back of his head and a similarly colored moustache, and who seemed utterly devoid of energy despite having a solid physique. In other words, it was Tei Suun.

“You’ve arrived rather early. I had thought only the ones manning the stove would be showing up around when the sun hit its peak.”

“Hmph. As if they could carry all this luggage with just the women,” Donda Ruu answered in a rumbling voice.

“Could you lead us to the main house’s kitchen? We’ll give our greetings to the clan head after that.”

“Right... But before that, could I collect your horns and tusks?”

On the day that I made my arrangements with Yamiru Suun, all of the clans received a message that they were to present one giba’s worth of horns and tusks at the clan head meeting.

For a set of two each of large horns and tusks, you could receive 12 red coins in the post town. That was nothing at all for the clans under the Ruu, but that amount of money could mean a matter of life or death for the small clans who were just barely hanging on.

The people of the forest’s edge lived in such a land of abundance, yet they were forbidden by the lord of Genos from gathering the blessings of the forests or tending fields. And so, the only option they had to live healthy lives was exchanging horns, tusks, and pelts for coins.

Then, once we handed these horns and tusks over to the Suun clan for the time being, they would eventually make it back to us as thanks for manning their stove. So honestly, I felt like I was adding to the burden of the small families without money to spare.

Still, we had no choice but to go along with their scheme if we were to correct the Suun clan’s wicked ways.

On top of that, I’d be putting in everything I had to make sure those losses led the way to the light of hope.

“Well then, this way...”

Having received eight giba’s worth of horns and tusks in total, Tei Suun bound them together with a single leather strap and then started walking further into the settlement. As always, I didn’t sense even the slightest bit of energy or drive from the man. And it was hard to imagine the task of showing us around was one meant for a hunter, so why was he always being treated like a butler?

Huh...? Is it alright for him not to take our blades?

In the Ruu settlement, custom demanded that I let them take charge of my cooking knife at least until we reach the

kitchen, but Tei Suun made no such request. Well, that was better for me, but it still gave off a seriously sloppy impression.

"Just as gloomy as always, I see..." Rau Lea muttered under his breath.

Was that directed at Tei Suun, or at the whole of the settlement...? It was probably both.

The sun would be hitting its peak shortly, and yet we still hadn't seen hide nor hair of any other people.

Nobody was out chopping firewood or drying pico leaves. There were no women standing around chatting, or even children excitedly running about.

It was like we had wandered into a ghost town.

And from what I could observe as we passed by, the massive ritual hall was showing some serious signs of age. It had been mended here and there, but the walls coated in dry leaves looked half rotten. It hardly seemed like a fitting type of building for a place that got as much rain as the forest's edge, so maybe it was an old style from back when they lived in the forests of the south.

Were the Suun clan proper leaders of their people back when this building was made?

The answer to that only existed in the minds of those who were alive back then, like Granny Jiba.

"This is it..."

The ritual hall was like the remains of a rotting dinosaur, but it had apparently been hiding a splendid wooden building that in no way lost out to the main Ruu house.

Figuring that had to be the home of the main Suun family, I subconsciously braced myself.

This was the enemy stronghold... The fortress of fiends like Diga Suun who had committed countless foul deeds.

Tei Suun walked along in orderly steps like a robot, advancing around to the rear of the building.

"...This is the kitchen."

Sure enough, there was a small separate structure

behind the house itself, just like with the Ruu home. It was on the same scale, too. Heck, there were even two stoves installed outside like with the Ruu house.

“Hmm... Where are the women of the Suun clan?” Mia Lea Ruu questioned.

“I will go summon them. Hold on just a moment,” Tei Suun said with a bow, his gaze remaining vacant all the while.

With that, Tei Suun disappeared, and everyone started laying down their luggage off to the side of the door.

Over 90 kilos of giba meat. More than 400 aria. Around 300 poitan. Fruit wine, rock salt, and myamuu for seasoning. Cookware, as well as pseudo-rubber tree leaves for carrying everything.

It certainly was an extraordinary amount, especially when you saw it all in one place like this.

There would be 79 people attending the clan head meeting, 41 members of the Suun clan, and the nine of us manning the stove. Then, for Mida Suun, we needed to make enough surplus to feed ten people, bringing us up to 139 meals.

At any rate, this brought an end to the help the men would officially be providing, but there were still two or three hours left till the clan head meeting would begin. And so, the plan was to have them just hang around the kitchen until then.

“Still, once the clan head meeting kicks off, the men of the Suun’s branch families and the like will be able to move around freely. So don’t let your guard down no matter what, alright, Asuta?” Ai Fa whispered to me, despite the fact that I’d already heard that countless times.

“I know. And no matter what happens, I won’t do anything on my own. You take care too, Ai Fa, okay?”

“Hmph. I won’t be in any danger, though I will admit that it will be vexing not to have Gazraan Rutim around.”

Right, Ai Fa was set to talk about what sort of mindset

the Fa clan had in opening the shop in the post town, but since the tradition was for the heirs to stay behind and protect their homes, Gazraan Rutim would be absent from the meeting and unable to lend his support.

Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim would hardly be any help at all on that front, and the second son of the Rutim house unfortunately wasn't as skilled of a speaker as his elder brother. Though with that said, it was probably just that Gazraan Rutim was way too talented in that regard. After all, I had yet to see anyone else at the forest's edge who could speak as elegantly and intelligently as he could.

That must have been down to the general temperaments of the people of the forest's edge. Lots of the folks around here were rich and vibrant in their emotions, but there didn't seem to be that many who valued logic and reason. Within my limited field of acquaintances, I would say only Gazraan Rutim and Granny Jiba fell into that type... Though Jiza and Sati Lea Ruu and Ama Min Rutim felt like they had a bit of that to them, too.

"...It'll be alright. What matters most is that you get your feelings across," I whispered to Ai Fa. "I mean, no matter how skilled folks like me and Kamyua may be with our words, I think it'd be pretty hard for us to get through to the people of the forest's edge on an emotional level. But as one of their brethren, I'm sure you'll be able to do just fine."

"I don't know how you're able to say something like that after being around me for so long... But well, I suppose it's several times better than hearing you say it's impossible," Ai Fa bluntly muttered while scratching the tip of her nose. "I shall see my task through, to the best of my ability... And it seems the time has come for you to set about your work too, Asuta."

Following along with Ai Fa's gaze, I saw Tei Suun appear again from the shadow of the house. He was also accompanied by more than ten women behind him. And one of them soon slipped past Tei Suun and came to stand in

front of us.

"We have been awaiting you, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan. Our clan head Zuuro and my younger brother Mida have been greatly looking forward to today."

It was the eldest daughter of the main Suun house, Yamiru Suun.

This was my first time meeting her at the forest's edge.

In the post town she wore a veil and shawl to cover her bare skin, but now she just had on a regular cloth wrap to cover her chest and waist, and metallic accessories, causing her to look all the more beautiful... and all the creepier, too.

Her dark brown hair was done up carefully in dreadlocks. And her narrow eyes were almost unbelievably black. She was slender and tall with long limbs, so elegant looking that they wouldn't lose out even to Vina Ruu's.

This stench isn't something I've ever sensed from Ai Fa or Vina Ruu, though...

The sharpness of my sense of smell was probably the one and only physical ability I had over the people of the forest's edge. It wasn't just their muscles, as their sight and vision was also generally outstanding, but I seemed to be a bit better when it came to smell.

And so, I was more cautious of Yamiru Suun than anyone else I had met. I couldn't imagine it was human, but she was still always clad in the scent of blood, which I naturally found incredibly unnerving.

"Ah, there is one more thing I must inform you of at the start..." Yamiru Suun said with a chilling smile. "The payment for the Fa clan will no longer be 40 giba worth of horns and tusks, but 36. Is that acceptable?"

"What? I think that'll depend on the reason..."

"The reason is simple. In this past year, four clans have disappeared, bringing the total number down to 36. Some were wiped out, while others joined with other clans before it came to that, but regardless, there are now four less... And so, we would like to request that you make eight fewer

meals and accept 36 giba worth as your payment in turn.”

“Well it’s better than the number going up, but I thought agreements couldn’t be overturned so lightly here at the forest’s edge.”

“That’s correct. And that’s why I’m earnestly making this request of you now.”

I was astounded to hear the word “earnest” come out of her mouth and couldn’t help but shrug my shoulders. If that was known in advance, then they certainly should have had plenty of ways of letting us know ahead of time. It was so laughably dishonest that I’d feel like an idiot for trying to be honest while taking them on.

And yet, this was the only stage I had to fight them on.

“We won’t exactly feel like carrying all this heavy luggage back at this point. So if everyone from the Ruu and Rutim agree, then we’ll accept. We’re planning on splitting the payment, after all.”

“Who cares about the payment? What matters is getting started already,” Mia Lea Ruu stated bluntly, looking completely unshaken as she stepped in front of Yamiru Suun.

Yamiru Suun, meanwhile, shot her back a disinterested chilly glance.

“Well then, we look forward to your work, Asuta of the Fa clan. Feel free to use these 15 women however you please.”

15, huh? That sure was a lot.

I had heard there were 41 people living in the Suun settlement, so that must have meant nearly all the women had gathered.

And yet, I was at a loss for words as I looked them over.

What in the world is going on...?

These women of the forest’s edge all varied in terms of age. The oldest looked to be around fifty, while the youngest was probably about ten. And they were a mix of both married and unwed women. That was all perfectly normal, with nothing notably out of sorts.

Except... Their eyes all looked dead.

Both the old women and the young girls had the same sort of cloudy, muddled gazes as Tei Suun.

Their faces were all utterly expressionless, too. I couldn't sense so much as a shred of the vitality usually possessed by the people of the forest's edge in any of them. They weren't especially wasting away, nor did they seem like they were even really unhealthy. They just seemed to be completely and utterly listless.

They were lacking in energy more than the people from the post town, or back in my old world, or really any people I had ever seen as they stood there vacantly, looking like poorly crafted clay dolls.

"Well then, I have my own work to handle, so please excuse me... Ah, and the clan head hasn't woken up yet, so you men standing there will need to wait till later to greet him, too," Yamiru Suun said with a smile like a viper, then she departed. Tei Suun followed along after her like it was only natural.

After they were gone, Mia Lea Ruu loudly clapped her hands together.

"Well then, shall we carry in the luggage?! Please go ahead and get the poitan first!"

With that, the women of the Suun clan swayed on over without saying a word. Their movements weren't extremely sluggish or anything, but they still somehow reminded me of a swarm of zombies.

"What was with that eerie woman...?" Dan Rutim questioned in an annoyed tone from behind me.

That sounded like he was perhaps just talking to himself, but I went ahead and responded, "She's the eldest daughter of the main Suun house, Yamiru Suun."

"A woman of the main house, huh? She seems to have more backbone than those three dunce sons, but I've got no interest in dining alongside someone giving off such an unpleasant stench."

“Huh?”

I looked up at Dan Rutim’s large frame with a bit of surprise, and saw that his round nose was sniffing the air.

“Why does that woman smell of rotten blood? There’s no way she could handle skinning a giba with skinny arms like that.”

“You have a pretty sharp nose, don’t you, Dan Rutim...”

“Hmm? Yeah, I can even pick out a giba in the forest by their stench. Even among the Rutim, only me and my old man Raa can do that,” Dan Rutim said in a bragging tone, rubbing the tip of his nose as his potbelly shook. “At any rate, I don’t like her. I’m not fond of any of the Suun clan, but that woman’s on another level. Asuta, make extra sure not to let your guard down around her, alright?”

“Yeah. I’m thoroughly in agreement on that,” I said with a nod as I grabbed a bag of poitan.

Then, I turned back towards Ai Fa.

“Well then, I’ve got my own work to get to... Let’s both give it our all.”

Ai Fa just silently gave a single nod back, an intense expression on her face.

With that, the curtain quietly raised on our battle at the Suun settlement.

2

There were eight women from the Ruu and Rutim clans accompanying me. On the other hand, there were 15 women from the Suun clan.

Those numbers were plenty enough for manning the stove and making roughly 130 meals. The real issue wasn’t the quantity, but the quality.

“Umm, are any of you from the main Suun house?” I asked once we got all the poitan and cookware into the kitchen.

Naturally, there wasn't enough space for 24 people at once, so we were gathered out front.

Ai Fa and Donda Ruu and them were all seated on the ground a bit removed, keeping an eye on us while chewing away on jerky.

"No, none of them are here," the eldest woman replied in a monotonous tone.

"Really? That's a problem. I wanted to teach the women of the main house my cooking techniques, so they could prepare these dishes for Mida Suun in the future."

She stood there silently, staring at me.

"What is it?"

"...The women of the main house don't man the stove."

"Huh? Then who cooks for the main house?"

"We all are given that task..."

"Is that so? But there are three women in the main house, aren't there?"

I heard from Gazraan Rutim that in addition to Yamiru Suun, there was also a younger daughter and the clan head's wife.

The woman just repeated, "We all are given that task..."

"I see. Got it. Well then, let's get to work... First off, please light all the stoves. And I only see four pots, so could you bring three more over from the branch houses?"

The Suun clan women started tottering along again, still not saying a word.

As we watched them listlessly move, Vina Ruu whispered, "I'm sort of worried about how this will go... Wouldn't it be a lot easier if we just did all the work ourselves...?"

"Yeah. The fact that we can't do that is what makes this so tricky."

For a variety of reasons, our plan was to drive my cooking techniques into the women of the Suun clan.

One was to satisfy Mida Suun's craving for delicious food.

Another was to let the head of the Suun clan, Zuuro Suun, know that my ability to make good cooking wasn't

anything that unique.

And lastly, we needed to let all of the clan heads know that tasty food can bring greater strength and prosperity to the forest's edge.

But was it even possible to drive techniques into such listless people?

It really did seem like this would be a far trickier job than the Rutim wedding banquet.

"Please fill the pots up to around 60 percent with water. And go with a strong flame in the stoves... Once they come to a boil, add 40 poitan into each pot."

There were five stoves in the kitchen. Those were assigned to ten members of the Suun clan, the three sisters from the main Ruu house, and Tari Ruu.

Then, there were two more stoves outside. The ones tasked with those were the other five Suun women and the two from the Rutim clan.

In addition to providing cooking guidance, they also had the important task of keeping an eye on the Suun women to make sure they didn't try anything. Well, it was hard to imagine them mixing poison into food they would be eating, but it still was important to be extra cautious when dealing with the Suun clan.

"Once it's boiling, make sure to stir it so the poitan doesn't burn. Now then... Let's go ahead and confirm the schedule."

As I stood in the kitchen's entrance, I called over Mia Lea and Sheera Ruu.

"As planned, let's make the soup on the branch family stoves once we're done boiling down the poitan. My group will have Vina and Lala Ruu, Mia Lea Ruu's group will include Ama Min and Morun Rutim, and Sheera Ruu, you'll have Reina and Tari Ruu. Does that work for everyone?"

"I don't mind. But we'll be leaving the boiled poitan here in the meantime? That's what has me most worried."

"I'd be lying if I said that didn't concern me, too. But

ultimately, it'd be difficult to prepare this much food all in one place. We'll just have to be diligent about sampling everything to make sure it hasn't been messed with."

"That's true... Still, why are all of the Suun clan women so..." Mia Lea Ruu started to say, only for a rough male voice to sound out.

Looking in the direction of the sound, it seemed there were now some unfamiliar men over where Donda Ruu's group was hanging out.

"Ah... What's that about?"

Even at this distance, I could clearly tell there was something suspicious about them.

The six men there were all facing Donda Ruu's group and raising their voices about something.

Four of the group had giba fur cloaks that went over their heads, while the other two were wearing full-on giba skulls.

"Those are the clans who rule over the north of the forest's edge. The ones with the pelts are the Zaza and Jeen clans, while the ones wearing the skulls are the Dom. All of them serve under the Suun..."

"So those are the clans under the Suun, huh...?"

"Yeah. Apparently, they're even more of a problem than the Suun clan in some ways. At any rate, from what I hear, they're quick tempered and even more hardheaded than our clan head."

"Huh? Even more than Donda Ruu?" I said, immediately regretting letting that slip.

As the wife to that stubborn clan head, though, Mia Lea Ruu just gave an amused chuckle.

"It seems that having heads as hard as rocks has led to them swearing absolute loyalty to the leading clan. The Dom and Zaza settlements are off at the northernmost limits of the forest's edge, much farther than the Suun, so they still don't seem to have any idea just how far those fools have fallen."

"I see... That certainly does sound troublesome."

“Yeah, it’s a pain. Perhaps they think that by going against the Suun, the Ruu and Fa are trying to threaten the peace of the forest’s edge.”

Yup, that was certainly an issue.

Perhaps somewhere deep down I had grown conceited enough to think that if it came down to violence, Donda Ruu and Ai Fa and them could handle it just fine. After all, the men of the main Suun house were just so pathetic.

But the men facing off with Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim now looked every bit as daring as their opponents, and particularly vicious on top of that.

Both the men with the pelts and those with the skulls had robust physiques that wouldn’t lose out to the Ruu and Rutim clan heads in the least. And with those imposing outfits, they looked like massive giba standing on two legs.

There were only six of them in total, and yet they didn’t look afraid of Donda Ruu’s group of 15 in the least. I couldn’t tell what they were so mad about, but they really did look so angry that they could draw their blades at any moment.

“Agh, I told you, you have to take care so you don’t burn it!” I suddenly heard Lala Ruu yell out flustered. “All you had to do was stir it, right?! Ugh, whatever, just get out of my way!”

“Right...” another voice weakly replied.

As I peered into the kitchen, I saw Lala Ruu snatching a wooden spatula from a rather young girl from the Suun clan, then start violently stirring the contents of a pot.

“Sorry, Asuta! It may have gotten pretty burnt! Should I take it off the stove right away?”

“Yeah. If some of it’s burnt, then it’s best to do that even if it’s a bit watery, so—” I started to say, only for a shriek to cut me off.

Then, there was the dull sound of something heavy hitting the ground.

That worrying commotion had come from the outdoor stoves.

Mia Lea Ruu and I went running out to check, where we found Morun Rutim seated on the ground, Ama Min Rutim with a perplexed look on her face, and a pot with half of its poitan spilled out on the ground. Then I spied some Suun women standing there looking dumbfounded, holding a grigee pole meant for transport.

“Ama Min Rutim, what happened?!”

“Ah, Asuta... I’m so sorry. The poitan were all boiled down, so I was thinking it was time to take the pot off the heat, but it ended up like this.”

While her sister-in-law cradled her head like she had a headache, Morun Rutim angrily yelled out, “We almost got seriously burned there!” by her feet. Normally she was gentle-natured, but now her face was beet red with rage. “Why were you so weak-kneed? If you can’t even carry a pot properly, then you’re not fit to man the stove!”

She really did look more and more like her father as she raged away.

However, the women from the Suun clan just said, “Right,” and nodded, their expressions as vacant as always.

“These really are some grim prospects for how things are going to go,” Mia Lea Ruu said with a deep sigh. “The clan heads seem like they have it rough too, but we don’t have the time to spare for worrying about them. The poitan is the simplest dish, yet it ended up like this. I mean, there’s no way we can leave the soup and steak up to them, right?”

“Yeah. We’ll have to change gears a bit.”

I had thought we would use this initial task to scope out the Suun women’s skills, but apparently we couldn’t take things so casually.

And so, after giving one last glance towards Ai Fa’s group squaring off with the clans under the Suun, I made a u-turn back into the kitchen.

“Lala Ruu! Bring the burnt pot over here! And a ladle for a water jug, too! Sheera Ruu, please take Lala Ruu’s place and support Reina Ruu’s group.”

“Right.”

Lala Ruu and a Suun clan woman brought over the pot, then we lined it up alongside the one from the Rutim group.

“Ladle the poitan that didn’t get burnt over to this pot. Then, get one more fresh pot... No, better make it two. Then, add enough to one of them to make up for the amount that spilled and burnt to boil down.”



Now that it came to this, we were actually lucky in a way to have that cancellation of eight meals. Naturally, we had brought along extra ingredients to make up for mistakes when cooking, but I hadn't expected anything this bad.

It couldn't be that they screwed up on purpose to drag us down, right?

It would be one thing if they were screwing up in a way where we could be blamed, but they would be the ones getting reprimanded if those mistakes just now made it so there wasn't enough food.

No, it had to be that they were just so completely and utterly lacking in drive.

"Alright. Looks like we'll use up all the remaining poitan. Lala Ruu, could you prepare the rest in a way that it serves as an example for them to work off of?"

"Yeah. I mean, I couldn't stand it if they wasted any more poitan... Seriously, I see you just standing there with those dull looks on your faces, but just what do you think our precious food is? These poitan were earned with the giba tusks and horns the men risk their lives to obtain, you know."

Lala Ruu was clearly mad, but the Suun women just emotionlessly responded, "Our deepest apologies."

With that I returned to the kitchen alongside them, and found that fortunately all the other stoves had finished the task without incident.

However, Vina and Reina Ruu looked more than a little fed up.

"Those poitan are all boiled down, right? Then take the pots outside to a place where they'll get good sunlight! And take care so that there aren't any spills!"

After a few seconds of lag, the Suun clan women grabbed hold of grigee poles.

With that, all the pots were carried outside, and once Lala Ruu's additional portion was ready, I lined it up out front alongside the others with the help of another member

of the group.

"After boiling the poitan down and then exposing them to sunlight like this, you need to wait until the moisture is completely gone. We're going to use that time to make giba and aria broth, but before that, I'd like to go back over a number of things about today's work... Everyone from the Suun clan, could you please step back into the kitchen?"

As I watched the women silently shuffle along out of the corner of my eye, I grabbed one of the bags of giba meat off to the side of the door.

"Vina Ruu, could I have you come with me, too? And everyone else, just go ahead and watch over us from the entrance."

The 15 women from the Suun clan, me, and Vina Ruu... It was as large of a kitchen as the one from the Ruu house, but I still didn't think any more people could fit inside.

The rest of the group who didn't get in stared into the kitchen, clearly wondering what was about to happen.

I placed the bag atop the work station set next to one of the stoves, then looked over the women standing there.

"This is giba meat brought here by the Ruu and Rutim clans. Today, we'll be using this to prepare dinner."

The Suun women stared at me with dead fish eyes, making it hard to tell if I even had their attention.

"This meat was prepared with a special technique, so it doesn't have the stench you would expect. Are you all aware of the fact that using such meat, I've opened a shop selling food in the post town?" I asked the closest of the women.

"No..." she replied.

"I see. Then is it safe to assume you all are unaware why a group like us with no ties to the Suun are in charge of manning the stove?"

"Yes... We are unaware."

"Right. Well then, ten days ago, the youngest son of the main Suun house, Mida Suun, came by my shop and purchased my cooking. And it seemed he enjoyed it a great

deal, so for this one night, your clan head Zuuro Suun asked me to man the stove.”

The women showed no change whatsoever.

Were they not especially afraid of the main house, then?

“As a result, I need to make cooking that will satisfy Mida Suun, but if it’s just limited to tonight, then there’s not much point to it, is there? And so, I would like all of you to learn how to make delicious cooking too, as you man the Suun clan stoves on a daily basis... Do you find that disagreeable?” I asked, now facing another of the women at the front of the group.

That slightly older-looking woman emotionlessly replied, “...We have no reason to feel that way.”

“I see... Well then, do you have any personal interest in eating delicious food?”

“I don’t understand very well what you mean by ‘delicious food’...”

“Hmm... And what about you?” I questioned, turning to a younger girl next to her.

“I believe that taste has nothing to do with it, and we should be grateful for all food.”

It was a model response for a person of the forest’s edge.

Ai Fa and the members of the Ruu and Rutim had all felt the same exact way at the start.

“That’s certainly true. But as you can see, I’m a foreigner, and I worked as a chef back where I came from. And so, it was my job to make tasty food. The head of the Suun clan has already arranged to pay me, and so I intend to see my work through, no matter what.”

I looked at yet another woman.

“Will you help me with that work?”

“We have been ordered by Yamiru Suun to do as such...”

“Thank you... However, this whole matter has grown to the point such that this dinner won’t just be for Mida Suun and the main house, but also everyone attending the clan head meeting and the Suun branch families. So we need to

do a proper job of preparing food for you all and your families, too.”

With that, I finally pulled a bundle of meat out of the bag.

I unraveled the pseudo-rubber leaf, then placed the meat chunk coated in pico leaves atop the work station. This particular chunk was from the back right leg.

“Vina Ruu, could you heat up a pot with a strong flame?”

“Yeah, got it...”

In the meantime, I cut up the meat using my kitchen knife. Even though I had procured the cooking knife from Sym, this guy was still my go-to when it came to handling meat.

“You all may not have any interest in tasty cooking, but my job is to feed it to people. And since we’re working together like this, there’s a bond of sorts between us, so I look forward to cooking with you.”

“...Are you perhaps angry at us for burning and dropping those pots?” the eldest of the women, her hair partially turned white, asked in a flat tone. “If that’s so, then we offer our apologies. We hope to take care from here on out not to mess up again.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I just want us all to keep thinking positively as we do our work,” I replied as I stared at the woman’s exhausted-looking face. “Why are you all making such listless expressions? Do you hate manning the stove? Or do you find it distasteful to help out a foreigner like me?”

“No one feels dissatisfied with this work...”

It felt like I was trying to talk to an old dog who didn’t understand human language.

They all really were just like Tei Suun, utterly lacking in energy, completely apathetic, and unemotional.

And also... Both these women and Tei Suun are all from the branch families.

As far as I knew, none of the members of the main Suun

house had such eyes. There had to be some sort of massive difference between those two groups.

I didn't know what that may be, but with things like this, I definitely couldn't let this work end in a massive failure.

"Asuta, the pot's all heated up..."

"Thanks," I replied, setting aside my knife.

Then, I held up the five millimeter-thick slices of thigh meat for the Suun clan women to see.

"I'm going to cook this meat now. The only flavoring I'll be using is pico leaves. It has some nice fat clinging to it though, so I'll just be grilling it as is."

Just as I said I would, I added the thigh meat to the pot, 15 slices in total.

White smoke rose up and the smell of grilling meat filled the kitchen.

"Vina Ruu, please get me a plate and spoon for each of them."

"Got it."

The cuts were thin, so they were ready in no time at all. With that, I transferred them all to the plates, then handed them to the Suun women.

"Please, each of you try a piece. This is what giba meat is like when it's been bloodlet."

One of the women picked up her spoon and dug in. Her face remained completely expressionless, but her eyebrows wriggled just a bit.

The next woman had no reaction at all. The one after that gently closed her eyelids. The following one opened her eyes ever so slightly wider. Yet another woman didn't react.

Their reactions all differed from person to person.

The one with the greatest change in expression in the group was the youngest girl, who looked to be around ten. She knitted her brows a bit for some reason, then looked left and right at the members of her clan. Not a one of them responded, though.

"I don't know if it was to your liking or not, but it had a

different taste, right? The members of the Ruu and Rutim have judged it as being delicious. I've heard countless times since coming to the forest's edge that when it comes to food, there is no good or bad taste. But I think that if you're going to be eating anyway, then why not make it something that tastes good?"

That was as far as I could go by trying to reach them with words. From here on out, I'd just have to have them experience it firsthand.

"What we'll be making from here on out will be far more delicious than what you just tasted. Please, help me make it, for the sake of Mida Suun, too... Now then, I'd like us to split into three groups and get to cooking."

3

By the time we stepped back out of the kitchen, the men were gone.

As I tilted my head and wondered where they went, Reina Ruu gently approached and whispered, "The men are in the ritual hall. There's still some time till the clan head meeting, but apparently the clans under the Suun were complaining about them wandering around the settlement with their blades on them."

"I see," I said with a nod.

"Asuta, what should we be doing next?"

"We'll split into three groups and start making soup as planned. And I'd like you to have the Suun women taste test it at every key point."

"Taste test it?"

"Yeah. And I don't mind if it's just idle chatting or whatever, but could you try to bond with them as much as possible while working? The feelings you put into your cooking are important, after all. If they stay as listless as they are now, it could have an effect on the final dish."

"Ah... I sort of understand, somehow. You mean the desire to make delicious food leads to the dish turning out tasty, right?"

"Yup. That's exactly what I meant," I said with a big nod, and Reina Ruu shot me back a joyful smile.

"Got it. We all may have been a bit too on edge ourselves, because we were dealing with the Suun clan. But we're all women of the forest's edge, so I'd like to believe we share the desire to make delicious food for the men."

Reina Ruu really was both kinder and wiser than most folks.

After I gave the same explanation to Mia Lea and Sheera Ruu, I met up with the members of my group. That meant Vina and Lala Ruu.

"Well then, could all of you from the Suun clan split up into three groups, too? And if you don't mind, please try to stick as much as possible with members of your house and people you are especially close to."

With that, we formed our unit of five members of the Suun clan and three of us, grabbed the necessary amount of aria and meat, and headed off to a branch family kitchen.

"Now then, let's start by chopping up the aria. I'd like you to cut them into wedges, which is done like this."

One portion of giba soup used two aria and 150 grams of giba meat.

"Now that I think about it, we're making ten people's worth of food for Mida Suun thanks to that physique of his, but he couldn't possibly need 10 servings of soup too, right?" I asked one of the Suun women, taking care to act even cheerier than I did when working in the post town.

However, she just listlessly responded, "I'm not sure..." while chopping up aria.

"Well, I guess it's better to have too much than to have too little. And besides, the plan is to prepare a little extra of everything, anyway... Is Mida Suun at home right now, or is he out in the forest?"

"I'm not sure..."

"I actually still haven't ever met the clan head, Zuuro Suun. I know he's the head of the Suun clan, which makes him the leader of the forest's edge, but what sort of person is he?"

"Zuuro Suun is a praiseworthy man..."

So this is what an exercise in futility felt like, huh?

Vina and Lala Ruu couldn't find anything to talk about either, so they were now completely silent.

Seeing that, I decided to change targets.

"Hey, what did you think of that meat from before?" I asked the girl of around ten, who happened to be in this group.

The girl kept on chopping aria like some sort of machine, but she glanced over at me.

"The taste was entirely different than normal giba meat..."

"Right? You see, that was made by draining the giba of blood before it completely passes away, then after that, removing the innards properly. When you do that, even the giba torso tastes good."

"I see..."

"Do you all toss the torso away into the forest, too? Giba legs are tasty, of course, but there are plenty of tasty parts in the torso, too."

The girl shook her head, remaining expressionless all the while.

"We don't discard the torso..."

"Huh?"

"We eat both the head and the torso... The stench is much stronger than with the legs, though."

"Hmm, I see," I replied, making sure to stay plenty friendly despite the feeling of unease swelling inside.

So even the members of the branch families eat giba heads and torsos... Wait, isn't there something strange there...?

Ai Fa had said the Suun clan was monopolizing the reward money from Genos and not carrying out their duty as hunters. So that meant they were using that money to buy aria and poitan and eating a giba down to the bones whenever they happened to catch one? If that was the case, they could keep the dangerous work to a minimum and fool around to their heart's content for the rest of the time.

But was that not limited to the members of the main house? Were even the folks of the branch families living such lazy lifestyles?

I tried thinking it over properly, but it just didn't seem realistic. That feeling was probably rooted in my habit of running calculations when working in the post town.

Is the Genos reward money really that great of a sum?

Thanks to this job, I was able to learn the precise number of members in the Suun clan: 8 in the main house and 33 in the branch families, making for 41 in total.

And so, I tried to consider how it would go if all 41 of those people weren't hunting down a single giba.

To get the minimum amount of nutrition, a person needed three aria and two poitan a day. Converted to money, that would be 1.2 red coins. And since we were talking 41 people, that meant 49.2 coins.

Gazraan Rutim had also said that the reward money was delivered once every three months. That meant roughly 90 days. And so, the clan would require 4428 red coins for that period of time.

Then, I tried factoring in them hunting enough giba to get the minimum amount of necessary meat.

As a rough estimate, each person would need 500 grams of giba meat per day to get the needed amount of nutrition, and it would be possible to obtain around 40 kilograms of meat per giba on average. So, well, if they caught one giba every other day, that should be about right.

That would mean they could get 24 coins every two days for the horns, tusks, and pelt. In a month, that would amount

to 360. In three months, it would hit 1080 coins.

Subtracting 1080 coins from 4428, you got 3348. And if you were talking that much every three months, that meant 13392 red coins per year.

For 41 people to play around as they please, they would need that many coins per year at a minimum.

And yet, Kamyua Yoshu had said the reward money was a trifling amount. Of course, as Ai Fa had responded, that was why they were keeping it to themselves. But still... could you really call a number like that “trifling”?

Plus, that was only the absolute minimum number to get what they needed to live. But there was no way that the main Suun house was living so frugally.

Doddo Suun walked around drinking fruit wine in the middle of the day.

Mida Suun was given ten red coins worth of allowance once a month to spend on food.

On top of that, if their blades snapped they needed to be replaced, and assorted other expenses like clothing had to be considered.

That made me think the Suun clan wasn't just relying on the reward money and were hunting a certain number of giba... But then that comment that they eat giba heads and torsos felt strange to me.

If the reward money was less than what I just calculated, they would need to hunt more than one giba every other day, but as a result, they would end up with an excess of meat.

Something just wasn't quite sitting right with me. Some part of this felt ever so slightly odd, but I didn't know what.

And there was also the fact that I still didn't know the reason behind the branch family members' listless gazes. I had imagined it being just the main family monopolizing the reward money, while the branch families were forced to keep that secret... but was that not the case?

“Asuta, I think we're done with the aria...” Vina Ruu

called out, bringing me back to my senses.

“Right, well then next up is the giba meat. For the soup, we’ll be using giba leg and shoulder meat,” I said, giving my head a quick shake and focusing on the work in front of me.

No matter how much I racked my brains, as long as I didn’t know the amount of reward money or giba they were hunting, I couldn’t arrive at a proper answer.

Still, I had my definite doubts, so I stowed them away in the corner of my mind.

“The giba leg meat should be cut like I showed you before, with the white fat evenly distributed. And you want the slices to be about this thick.”

There was no response.

I said that idle chatting or whatever would be fine, but when you were dealing with such listless people you were meeting for the first time, it was hard to know exactly what topic would catch their interest. I was starting to feel a stronger and stronger desire to just come out and bluntly ask them what they thought of the main house’s foolishness, but then...

Lala Ruu loudly shouted, “Wah! Y-You scared me there! Who are you? And where in the world did you sneak in from?!”

“I mean, I’ve been here for a while now. I’d say you were just too dense to notice, right?” a high-pitched voice like a chirping bird replied.

I was feeling pretty darn surprised, too. There should have been exactly eight of us in the kitchen, but at some point a ninth had worked her way in: a very small girl.

And yet, I had no idea what age she might be.

She was about one head shorter than Lala Ruu, no more than 130 centimeters, I’d say. Her arms, legs, and torso were all quite thin, but her head alone was strangely large. And her dark brown hair was pulled up tight at the top of her head, like an onion.

With her eyes wide open, their whites really stood out.

Her pupils were small and black, though, and had a crafty look to them. Both her nose and mouth were tiny, and her chin came to a point like a triangle.

And for some reason, her tiny body was clad in a tubular one piece dress. The cloth had a swirling pattern, but it was in the style of what was worn in town.

“You’re the foreigner living at the Fa house, aren’t you...?” she asked, her wily eyes staring straight at me.

“Hmm, your appearance is like that of the people of the west. Your hair color is like folks from the east, though. Do you have mixed blood from those two nations?”

“No, I come from a much further off country, but... Who exactly are you?”

Naturally, I had an idea before even asking.

I hypothesized that her haughtiness marked her as a member of the main house, in which case it was almost certain who she must be.

Unsurprisingly, her response confirmed my suspicions.

“I’m the youngest daughter of the main Suun house, Tsuvai Suun. Isn’t it proper manners to introduce yourself before asking someone else’s name, though?”

“Ah, I’m Asuta, a member of the Fa clan. Did you come to help out too?”

With that, Tsuvai Suun’s thin eyebrows raised in anger and she retorted, “Why should a member of the main house have to help man the stove? That’s a job for the branch families, right? Don’t go around spouting such nonsense, geez!”

“Ah, so that’s the custom in the Suun clan?”

My alertness had peaked with the arrival of a member of the main house, but still, she didn’t seem to make as bad of an impression as her siblings.

She didn’t especially look like a good or sincere person or anything, but she had a bit of an affectionate and humorous appearance to her. I got a sort of déjà vu, making me wonder if she was reminding me of a character from a manga or

anime or something.

“Hmph! Well, you’re a foreigner, so I guess I’ll let it slide... Hmm, so that’s the magic giba meat?”

“Ah, no, I’m not a sorcerer or anything.”

“What are you saying?! I mean, you were able to sell this giba meat in the Genos post town, right?! The people there all hate giba meat, so how would you do that using anything but magic?!” she hysterically wailed, but then her big eyes narrowed and she stared at me. “Hey... Is it true that you’ve been able to earn 200 red coins in a day doing that? I can’t believe that at all...”

“If you can’t believe it, then I don’t mind if you don’t.”

“Whatever, just give me a proper answer! If you go lying to me, I’ll be able to research it and find out easily enough anyway!”

She was acting pretty familiar, but she was also way too noisy.

I looked around to see what everyone thought of this scene unfolding, and...

Vina Ruu’s sleepy eyes were narrowed as she stared at the intruder.

Lala Ruu also knitted her brows and looked displeased as she glared at the girl.

And as for the women of the branch families, they looked as emotionless as always as they chopped away at the meat. Apparently, the arrival of Tsuvai Suun hadn’t affected them in the least.

“Hey... how many days have you been doing business in the post town for, Asuta?” Tsuvai Suun asked as she sidled up to me. “It was ten days back that Mida started sobbing away, right? So you’ve already been open for ten whole days?”

“Well, that’s about it.”

In actuality it was a 13-day period with one day off, but I was under no obligation to answer so precisely.

“Ten days! So if it’s 200 coins per day, then that means

you've already earned 2000 red coins!"

"Ah, no, around half of that goes to expenses, and it wasn't like I was making 200 coins from the very first day..." I hurriedly tried to correct her, but the words didn't seem to get through at all.

The girl's eyes had clearly lit up. Somehow, it was like the tenacious stare of a starving beast.

"2000 red coins would be 200 white, or two silver!"

"Ah, yeah, but like I said, it wasn't like all that money goes right into my pockets..."

"It's like a dream! Now that the Fa clan has a hold of you, they'll never need to worry about money again for the rest of their lives! Hmm, let's see..."

"Hold on a second! Haven't you heard what I said?! And what does money matter anyway?"

"What do you mean? The reason we're alive is to make money, right? That makes you the greatest hero at the forest's edge! After all, making 200 red coins a day is the same as hunting down eight giba in that short a time! And that's assuming the pelts are skinned, too!"

I was left a bit dumbfounded at how this girl was able to run through calculations just like me.

Could that tenacious glare in her eyes... have come from a fixation on money...?

"I never expected to hear a person of the forest's edge say they lived just to earn money. Don't the hunters of the forest's edge hunt down giba in order to protect the fields of Genos?"

"What are you saying? The hunters hunt giba for coins, too! If there are any hunters out there that feel differently, then they aren't fit to sell tusks and horns! No matter how much you may try to gloss over it, a person can't live without money!"

"I mean, that may be so, but..."

"So, the reason the giba multiplying is a problem is because they'll attack the fields, right? And if that happens,

then they'll eat up all the crops. Then if that happens, they won't be able to be sold for profit, which is the key issue, isn't it? So you see, it all comes back to money! That's the meaning of life! And if you don't like that, then your only choice is to toss aside all gods and go live with the wild people of Mount Morga!"

Since they were ranked in the pecking order of the mountain alongside varb wolves and giant madarama snakes, were the wild people some sort of human-related species?

At any rate, it seemed that Tsvai Suun didn't have even a hint of pride or respect as a person of the forest's edge.

"Um... I know it seems unlikely, but your mother isn't someone from town, right?"

"Huh? You're spouting nonsense again! Who ever heard of townsfolk marrying into the forest's edge?!"

"That's true. It's just, your clothing is sort of in the style I've seen about town, and you kinda talk like them."

"Ah, this...? I didn't like the outfits our people wear, so I revised mine," Tsvai Suun replied, sulking a bit.

With that, the tenacious shine finally started disappearing from her eyes. And thanks to that, I finally realized that this noisy girl was reminding me of a fairy who acted like a real fool in an old anime.

Well... I guess that still makes her pretty alright for a member of the main Suun house...

Still, maybe I only felt that way because I wasn't a natural-born person of the forest's edge.

If she were a townsperson I might not necessarily agree with her, but I wouldn't feel there was anything wrong with her, either. I'd just shrug my shoulders and accept that she was a bit obsessed with money.

However, for a person of the forest's edge, such thoughts were pretty much heresy.

Vina Ruu's eyes narrowed further as she grew more and more wary. Lala Ruu, meanwhile, looked downright

disgusted.

There was no way that someone who denied the pride of the hunters would ever earn respect at the forest's edge.

"Um... All of the meat is cut now..." one of the branch family women emotionlessly chimed in.

It seemed like every last person here had decided to just ignore Tsvai Suun.

"Thank you. Well then, let's light up the stoves."

We poured water from jugs into the pots, then used lana leaves to ignite the firewood. Tsvai Suun apparently couldn't even wait long enough for the water to start boiling before opening her mouth again, though.

"Geez! Mida really has raised a ruckus each and every day ever since he ate your cooking! He gets quiet when you feed him something, but as soon as he's hungry again he starts wailing! So it's no surprise that Diga and Doddo got all angry! I know you probably didn't want to get dragged all the way here either, but it's been a big pain for us too, so you better take responsibility!"

"Responsibility, huh? Now that you mention it, is Mida Suun really all chained up?"

"Hmm? Ah, for those first few days he was trying to head to town on his own, so it's possible."

"'Possible'? So you mean you didn't see it yourself?"

"I didn't. Yamiru's house is the only place with chains."

Yamiru's... house?

"Yamiru Suun has left the main house? But I'm pretty sure she still wears the outfit for unmarried women, right?"

"Yeah, she's unmarried. But there were lots of open houses, so Yamiru and Diga were given their own."

I see. In that case, if Mida Suun was being held in chains, then it would have to be Yamiru Suun who did it, huh?

What was going on? When I heard those words from Yamiru Suun I felt incredibly sickened, but I felt indifferent while talking to this girl. Maybe I could actually have a good rapport with Tsvai Suun after all.

Anyway, as I was thinking that over, the contents of the pots had started boiling.

"Alright, well then first off, please add the giba meat to your pot... When that happens, white scum will float up to the surface, so scoop that out with a wooden spoon. That way, this will end up as a delicious soup."

It really had been a while since I last taught anyone to prepare giba soup.

Over at the other stove, Lala Ruu was showing two women the method, while Vina Ruu and I were guiding the other three on our end.

"By the way... how old are you anyway, Tsvai Suun? I'm 17 years old," I called out during a break in the cooking.

"I'm 12. What about it?" Tsvai Suun replied with a pout.

"Ah, I was just wondering whether you or Mida Suun were older."

She was pretty darn small for 12, but regardless, it was a real shock hearing a kid that young say something like people only lived to make money.

"Hmph... There's no way I could be older than Mida. I wasn't even born till his mother died, after all."

"Huh?"

"Mida's mom died shortly after giving birth to him. Only I am actually the child of our current mom."

"Ah... is that so?"

A lot of men died young as hunters from what I had heard. Apparently, that meant it wasn't rare at all for a woman who lost her husband to remarry, but it seemed things had gone the other way around for the main Suun house.

When I heard what came next, though, I was left dumbfounded.

"Yamiru's mother died right after she was born, too. And it was the same with Diga and Doddo's moms. Mine is the only one who didn't die and kept on living. But it's strange, because she's not especially strong bodied or anything."

"Huh? Then you all have different mothers?"

"That's right. What about it?"

"What...? I mean, I'd never heard of women of the forest's edge dying so suddenly before now."

"Hmm? Then is the Suun clan cursed somehow?"

What she was saying was horrifying, yet she didn't seem to care at all and shrugged her bony shoulders.

"Or maybe they just got bored of life and ended up sick of it... I mean, you all are making faces like you can't tell if you're dead or alive, right? I can't imagine you have long to live if you're looking like that." Naturally, the back half of that statement was directed towards the women of the branch families.

As they kept on scooping scum, they listlessly replied, "Yes."

"Ugh, you're so irritating! I feel annoyed just being around all of you!"

"Then how about leaving the kitchen...?" Vina Ruu at last chimed in, seemingly unable to take it any longer. "If you aren't going to man the stove, then there's no point to you being here... Why did you even come to a place like this...?"

"Hmph! I just wanted to see the greatest hero of the forest's edge!" Tsuvai Suun stated, glaring at Vina Ruu far above her head. "Up until this foreigner showed up, our clan head Zuuro Suun was the number one hero! That's why the Suun clan has ruled the forest's edge! So from now on, the Fa clan may be in charge..."

"It really doesn't seem you can hold a proper conversation..."

"Hmph! That's just because you can't see the true face of the world!"

Leaving those words behind, Tsuvai Suun toddled out of the kitchen.

For a bit afterwards, an awkward silence filled the space.

"All the members of the main Suun house sure are unique, huh...?" I commented to one of the branch family

women. Unsurprisingly, all she said back was, "Yes."

Tsuwai Suun really may be easier to handle than this bunch.

"Alright... Once you're done scooping scum, we'll put the lids on and wait for the time being. We'll cook it slowly on a weak flame, then wrap things up by adding in aria."

One of the women took a square wooden board and went to place it atop the pot. However, her hand slipped from it and it splashed down into the pot.

The youngest of the girls shrieked, "Ah!" and then shrunk away, only for the boiling hot liquid to fly and hit her on the arm and face. "Agh!" she screamed and fell in front of the work station, only for a number of cut bits of aria to come tumbling down after her.

There was no time to worry about that, though, so I grabbed the ladle from the water jug without a moment's hesitation.

"Are you alright?! Don't move!" I yelled out, pouring the water over the girl. It was a bit aggressive on my part, but there was no helping that.

With that, the strength drained from her body and she sunk down onto the floor.

"Are you okay now? It didn't get into your eye or anything, did it?"

"I'm fine..."

The girl held her left arm and was firmly biting her lower lip. The skin from her left shoulder to her upper arm and from her left cheek to her throat were all a clear red.

"Gah, that looks painful! Here, use this to cool it down," Lala Ruu said, pushing a soaked cloth up against the girl's cheek.

"Thank you..." she weakly replied, casting her eyes downwards.

Then, another voice emotionlessly stated, "My apologies, Toor Suun..."

"Hey! Do you seriously even feel bad about it?! Do you

really think you can make it up to her if it leaves scars on her face?!” Lala Ruu yelled, completely and utterly furious.

Lala Ruu had wild emotions to begin with, but this may well have been the most angry I had ever seen her.

However, the woman who had made the careless blunder just stood there emotionlessly, while Toor Suun clung to Lala Ruu’s arm and said, “It’s alright... I’m also at fault for not paying enough attention... More importantly, I dirtied our precious aria. I’m so sorry...”

“The aria don’t matter at all! Well, no, that may not be true, but still...!” Lala Ruu said while tearing at her hair, and I gave a deep sigh.

It was true that we trampled over the spilled aria with our own feet, so now around half of them were utterly unusable.

“There’s no helping that now. We’ll just have to cut fresh ones to replace whatever’s unusable. But I’m a lot more concerned about your burn than that. Shouldn’t we be applying medicine or something to it?”

“It’s alright... We mustn’t waste precious medicine on something this trivial...”

“No, but—”

“I really am fine... Um, thank you...” Toor Suun replied, looking at me and Lala Ruu with a bit of fear visible in her eyes.

It was a very uneasy gaze... but it also looked a lot more human than the dead fish eyes I had been seeing from the branch family women.

“It looks like we’ll need to replace around ten aria worth... I’ll go get that much from the extras in the main house’s kitchen...” Vina Ruu chimed in, but I shook my head and said, “No.”

I figured it was best to have the women refrain from acting on their own as much as possible, too.

“The main house is pretty far, so for now let’s just borrow some of this house’s aria. Um... whose house is this?”

With that, Toor Suun replied, “It’s mine...” as she

crouched down in front of us.

"I see. Then sorry about this, but could we borrow ten of your aria? We'll give you back the same amount later, of course."

"There aren't any aria..."

"Huh?"

"We just ran out. I'm sorry..."

The light had swiftly drained from Toor Suun's eyes. It was like a translucent sludge was spreading through them.

I stared into those once again murky eyes, then turned to face the woman who had dropped the lid.

"Then can we have some aria from your house? It should be closer than the main house, right?"

"My apologies... My house also just ran out..."

I stood up and looked at each of the other three women in turn.

"Honestly, I don't care who it is. Can we borrow the aria from any of you?"

"I'm sorry..."

"My house is also all out of aria..."

"If today weren't the clan head meeting, it would have been the day we were scheduled to go to town in order to buy more..."

"Oh, I see," I replied with a smile. "I was surprised to hear all of your pantries were out of aria. But the Suun clan has a custom of waiting till you run out of ingredients before buying more, huh?"

"Yes..."

"By the way, would it be possible to borrow any poitan?"

"No... We're all out of poitan at the moment, too..."

"I see," I repeated again. "Well then, let's go get the aria we brought. There should still be plenty of extra left, so it shouldn't be an issue. Could you two go grab ten aria from the ones left by the main house's kitchen?"

"Right..."

With that, the two women I pointed to sluggishly exited

the kitchen.

As I watched them leave, I could feel the sense of unease I had sealed away in the back of my mind bubbling back up.

Something was odd here, and seriously wrong.

Was this really a settlement of the forest's edge?

If Vina and Lala Ruu weren't standing at my side, I might have been gripped by the fear that I had been thrown into yet another new world.

Everything about this place felt utterly twisted out of shape.

Roughly two hours later, everyone had gathered back at the main house's kitchen, having completed our giba soup. That meant next on the agenda was baking the dried poitan, then cooking the meat dishes. The sun was right about at the midpoint between its peak and where it would set. That meant we had roughly three and a half hours left, so we were more or less on pace. It was about time for the clan head conference to finally get rolling in the ritual hall, too.

While praying for the success of Ai Fa and the others, we set about guiding the women on how to bake poitan.

"Poitan that's been exposed to sunlight gets all hard like this, so you first dissolve it in water to return it to a semi-liquid state. Adjust that bit by bit with a ladle, taking care not to add too much water."

There were no more spare poitan left, so we had to be super careful to make certain that nothing burned this time around.

First, I had Sheera Ruu demonstrate for everyone, then we tore off bits of the baked poitan and had them taste.

"What do you think? It's like a completely different food compared to that usual goopy heated-up poitan, right?"

Around half the Suun women had their expressions ripple ever so slightly, while there was a clear shift on the faces of the other half.

Was that enough to make them think it was delicious?

I sincerely prayed that was the case.

“Bloodlet giba meat and baked poitan. With just these ingredients alone, you can create an entirely different dinner than what you’ve had up until now. And so, let’s each give it our all to bake the poitan up nice and tasty.”

While baking the poitan, we rotated through the groups and gave them all one-on-one guidance.

The fifteen Suun clan women all took turns baking poitan, while we watched over them and took care to make sure nothing burned. If we clung to them even more tightly than before, that would surely make it harder for them to make any real mistakes.

Ultimately, it took around an hour to bake enough poitan for about 130 people. And once that was done, it was finally time for the meat dishes.

First up was producing the marinade for the myamuu giba.

“This is myamuu. We’ll be chopping it up finely along with aria, then mixing it together with fruit wine. As for the amounts, with one bottle of fruit wine you want to have one myamuu and half an aria. Considering the quantities we’ll need, though, we’ll be making the marinade in pots and adding the meat into it.”

When making myamuu giba, we used a bit under 200 grams of meat per person. That meant the overall volume wasn’t all that different from what we handled back at the stall.

On top of that, we’d have a spare rib per person and around 200 grams of thigh meat steak, which we would supplement with sauteed aria, bringing the menu to completion.

While the meat for the myamuu giba was soaking, we went ahead and cut up the meat for the steaks. By then, it was a bit under two hours till sunset.

We were still doing alright.

At this rate, it seemed like we would be able to fully complete all the dishes with time to spare.

"It looks like the actual cooking will make it in time... But will these women really be interested in cooking delicious food of their own will from tomorrow on?" Mia Lea Ruu whispered.

"Hmm... It'd be nice if at least a few of them felt that way after dinner, but still..."

The outlook certainly wasn't good in the least. In fact, it was hard to tell if these women even really had much in the way of will or emotions.

"If the Suun settlement weren't so far away, we'd be willing to come each day until we beat it into them."

Even Mia Lea Ruu seemed a bit less energetic now. She had come here expecting to teach haughty women like Yamiru and Tsvai Suun a real lesson. And yet, when she actually made it here, this is what she found. No matter how much of a scolding you gave them, these women would never show any shame, as they pretty much seemed like clay dolls. It was hard to imagine it would be possible to change their way of thinking in just a single day.

"There's also still the matter of how the men and the folks from the main house react. But regardless of all else, Mida Suun is sure to keep demanding delicious dinners. They're going to have an obligation to respond to that."

The men would also need to change their way of thinking and learn how to bloodlet and dissect a giba if they wanted to eat delicious meat, but it was hard to say how that would play out.

And was Ai Fa doing alright...?

"Asuta, all the meat and aria are cut," Sheera Ruu informed me.

"Thank you. Well then... the marinated meat should be just about ready, so let's cook that up first. Everyone, please gather by the outdoor stoves."

Myamuu giba produced a lot of smoke, making it the sort of dish that was better to prepare outside.

"We'll add the meat to the pot and then stir it with a

spoon so that it doesn't burn as it cooks. To start with, we'll go ahead and prepare a small amount... Sheera Ruu, could you please?"

"Right," Sheera Ruu replied, grabbing a handful of meat and tossing it in the pot.

As the smell of myamuu and fruit wine spread, a number of the women's shoulders trembled.

"It smells good, doesn't it?" I said with a smile to Toor Suun, who was standing right next to me.

The girl's glasslike eyes slowly started to wander, looking just a bit helpless.

"It's a wonderful smell..."

"Yeah. I haven't met a person of the forest's edge who disliked this smell yet."

Myamuu had a strong scent like garlic, but both the men and women of the forest's edge all seemed to enjoy it.

"Once it's cooked, go ahead and sprinkle a bit of marinade over it. Doing so brings out the flavor even more strongly."

By the way, we cut the meat just a bit thicker than when selling it in the post town. And also, we soaked it in the marinade a bit less too, to better adapt the recipe for the forest's edge.

Furthermore, the people attending the clan head meeting were only supposed to bring bowls for soup, so they would be presenting the myamuu giba atop pseudo-rubber leaves. Thanks to that, we wouldn't be pouring the heated sauce over top of it. To compensate, we mixed it in thoroughly during this step before finishing up.

"Okay, that should do it. Now then, I'd like each of you to sample a bite again..."

As I was saying that, I heard a strange sound. It was oddly high in frequency and unpleasant, like a small bird's dying shriek.

"What's that sound?"

I stepped away from everyone and listened carefully. And

then, I noticed that the sound seemed to be steadily growing closer.

Ah! It couldn't be...! I thought to myself, only for my premonition to unfortunately hit the mark.

A massive ball of flesh had appeared from the shadow of the house, now roughly ten meters away. And that bundle of meat was clearly locked onto me as I stood just a few steps removed from the rest of the group.

"Oooooooooh...!" he yelled as he charged forwards.

At the same time, someone yelled, "Asuta!" and tried to grab me. Before long I had fallen to the ground, and was wrapped up in something incredibly soft. Through the gaps in the black hair blocking my vision, I could see the bundle of meat raging.

I'll be trampled! I thought, my whole body freezing up. But just then, someone else stepped forward wielding something long, slender, and dark: a grigee pole meant for transporting pots.

The chestnut-haired woman made an incredibly graceful throwing motion, and the grigee pole stabbed into the ground at the ball of meat's feet.

With that, his elephant-like legs got all tangled up on the pole.

"Uwaaaaaaaaa!" the bundle of flesh screamed out before tumbling to the ground.

He came rolling by close enough to almost graze our noses, only stopping when he collided with a nearby tree.

"Goodness... Is this really a human being...?" the woman who saved us muttered with a sigh, her sleepy looking eyes pointing our way. "It's alright now. It's a good thing I arrived before him though, isn't it...?"

"Yeah... Thanks, Vina," the person shielding me responded, then slowly rose up. "Are you injured, Asuta?" she asked with a smile.

Naturally, it had been Reina Ruu.



“N-No. What about you?”

“I’m fine. And I’m sorry for shoving you so suddenly,” she said while bowing her head, still straddling my stomach.

This body heat, and this soft sensation... With this position added on top, I couldn’t help but recall the night of the Rutim banquet.

After one last look at my face, Reina Ruu slowly stood up.

“How foolish... Covering him like that would only result in the two of you getting trampled together, right...?” Vina Ruu said with a bit of a sulk.

“Yeah, sorry. I really am no match for you, Vina,” Reina Ruu replied, hanging her head and looking embarrassed.

As I compared the incredibly complex differences in the sisters’ expressions, I also promptly got up on my feet.

“Thank you, both of you. You really saved my life there.”

Vina Ruu’s narrowed eyes glanced my way, and then shot back towards the ball of flesh.

That bundle of meat (Mida Suun, of course) had righted his massive frame and was staring vacantly our way.

“Huh... What was I doing...?” he questioned in a shrill, childish voice.

Yes, it was Mida Suun, through and through.

I was glad to see he was alright, but still, he was just as much of a monster as always.

“Ah... that’s right! There was a really good smell! I smelled it, then I took off running, I think...?”

“Dinner will be when the sun sets! Behave yourself until then!” Mia Lea Ruu firmly stated, slapping down Mida Suun’s whining.

Mida Suun’s busted nose sniffled, then he stood up while clinging to the tree.

“But... I’m hungry...”

“Then go chew on some jerky! The other men are all putting up with it, and we can’t go giving you special treatment!” Mia Lea Ruu uttered, her voice full of authority as she stood in front of Mida Suun.

She possessed a well built physique, but unsurprisingly, she looked as small as a child when compared to the bundle of meat before her. And yet, she didn't flinch in the least when staring over two heads up at Mida Suun's creepy face.

"Geez, you've got no discipline at all! I've thought this for a while now, but what's with that slovenly physique of yours? If you eat as much as you please whenever you feel the least bit hungry, of course you'll ruin your body. You need to learn how to restrain yourself better!"

"No..." Mida Suun muttered in a fretful voice. "But I..."

"No buts! And what exactly do you think you're doing right now, considering how high in the sky the sun is?! If you're a hunter, you should be out in the forest hunting giba, right?"

Her argument made perfect sense.

And yet, Mida Suun's puffed up, flabby cheeks trembled as he grumbled, "Work's all done for today. I caught a big giba already..."

"Hmm? Really? Well then, where is it?"

"I hung it in Yamiru's house... See, I'm not lying..." Mida Suun replied, suddenly reaching for the club dangling from his waist. Reflexively, I went to take a step forwards, but Vina and Reina Ruu grabbed my arms.

Mida Suun then thrust the top of his club out in front of Mia Lea Ruu's nose.

"Hmm... I see there's giba fur and blood stuck to it."

"That's right... The giba fell in a trap, then I finished it off..."

With that, Mia Lea Ruu smiled and patted Mida Suun on his arm that was so thick it looked like a tree.

"You certainly did carry out your duty as a hunter. And so, we'll prepare a delicious meal for you, so just wait patiently back home. We were just about to start grilling the meat, after all."

Mida Suun let out an eerie, "Uhehe..." and his plump cheeks shook again. Apparently, he just had too much fat on

his face, so he couldn't quite make proper expressions.

Vina Ruu's fingers were now digging into my left arm so hard that it hurt. It seemed she was trying her hardest to bear with how much he creeped her out.

And then, Mida Suun looked at me. His little eyes like a piglet's took on a slick shine.

"You really came... Yamiru wasn't lying after all..."

"Right. It's been a while..."

"I'm so happy... I'll get to eat yummy food, right...?"

"Yes. And we're also in the middle of teaching the Suun women how to make tasty food from now on."

It was hard to tell whether or not Mida Suun understood what I was saying, as he just repeated, "I'm so happy..."

"Well then, if you understand, then just head on back home like a good boy. We've got lots of work to take care of here."

"Yeah..." Mida Suun responded, his lower jaw wriggling a bit in response to Mia Lea Ruu's words.

It looked like he must have been trying to nod, but his fat got in the way.

"You promise, right...? I'll get to eat lots of yummy food...?"

"Right. Look forward to it."

Mida Suun finally slowly turned around, and I started to breathe a sigh of relief. But then, an idea hit me like a bolt of lightning.

"Hey, Mida Suun! If you happen to have any extra aria in the main house, could we use coins to buy some?" Mia Lea Ruu turned and shot me a questioning look. Mida Suun turned back my way, too. "You see, we just had some aria fall on the ground, so we're a bit short on them now. So if you have some to spare, we'd definitely like to buy them. What do you think...?"

"But the pantry is barred shut..." Mida Suun responded in his shrill voice. "I think it's to keep me from snacking on stuff..."

"I see. That's unfortunate. Aria are yummy, aren't they?" Mida Suun blinked his eyes, which were just as unreadable as an animal's.

"I don't know the names of vegetables..."

"Ah, is that so? The one that was used in that dish you bought in the post town is called 'aria.'"

"Hmm..." Mida Suun disinterestedly replied, his little lips forming a bit of a pout. "If you want the bolt loose, should I call for Yamiru...?"

"Ah, no, that's alright. We'll just try to make do with what we have left. Thank you, though."

Mida Suun just gave one last disheartened sounding, "I'm hungry..." and then departed.

"That child really does seem lacking in wits... But still, he has a rather cute side to him too, wouldn't you say?"

"Stop kidding around..." Vina Ruu groaned, slumping to the ground while still clinging to my arm. "Ugh, he's so gross... Why did he have to be the one who showed up...?"

"Ahaha, you really can't handle him at all, can you, Vina?" Reina Ruu innocently chuckled, still holding onto my right arm.

"By the way, Asuta, are we really that short on aria? I get the feeling that what we have should be plenty enough to compliment the meat..." Mia Lea Ruu asked with a look of doubt.

I shot back a friendly smile and replied, "That's true. If we can't get them, then that's totally fine. Let's just make it work with what we have."

Of course, since we were cooking for eight people less than expected, we weren't really short on aria.

As the two beautiful sisters held my arms captive, my gaze shot backwards. Next to the kitchen, there was the door to the pantry, which was firmly shut.

If it's bolted shut... Then how do they get into that pantry?

The doubts swelling up inside of me were finally starting

to vaguely take shape.

Chapter 2: The Clan Head Meeting

1

The sun finally started to set in the west, and at the same time, we finished all of our cooking.

There were a lot of little accidents along the way. But fortunately, we didn't face any interference from the main house aside from Mida Suun barging in, so in a way I'd have to say things ultimately went pretty smooth.

However, it was important not to let our guards down. After all, even if they didn't meddle with the cooking, it was still plenty possible they were plotting to spring something during or after the meal. At the very least, I wasn't buying that they invited us out here just because Mida Suun was being noisy or out of a bit of curiosity.

Were they plotting to get ahold of me because they saw how much I was capable of earning? Or perhaps they found me a nuisance and wanted to get rid of me?

I had no idea what their intentions were. And yet, I was certain they were plotting something.

And so, I kept on guard even after we finished cooking and set about laying out the dinner.



"Pardon us..."

As Vina Ruu and I entered the ritual hall carrying a pot of reheated giba soup, a number of piercing glares shot our way.

The sun would soon be setting and it was darker in the hall than outside, so a number of candles were already lit here and there. And the men illuminated by those orange flames were all fierce hunters of the forest's edge, their eyes blazing like wild beasts'.

The clan head meeting should have come to a close for the time being. And yet, there was an almost palpable tension hanging in the air.

It was like we were pushing through that crackling air as Vina Ruu and I approached a stove alongside the wall.

Just as I had suspected from what I saw outside, the hall was constructed as a pit. The floor looked to be a whole meter lower than ground level. And thanks to that, the ceiling looked unusually high and wide.

The circular roof was supported by four pillars, rafters connecting them, and radially aligned rafters. And fortunately, the rot didn't look as bad from in here as it did on the outside.

There were stoves installed alongside each of the four walls, so we placed the pot onto the one closest to the entrance. Even as we lit a flame in the stove, the men remained totally silent.

Present in this place were the leading Suun clan, the 36 clan heads, and the men accompanying each of them.

In total, there were over 70 people present, yet not even one of them had let out so much as a whisper. They all just sat there silently, watching as we worked away. Their blades must have been stored away elsewhere, but they all had on their hunting attire.

There were four entrances in total to the ritual hall, which the other women used to carry in pots, yet every single person present remained utterly mute, as if they had planned it in advance.

Figuring there was no need for the chefs to introduce themselves, though, I just got the stove lit and then hurried on out to take care of the next task.

But then, someone spoke up for the first time.

“Thank you for your hard work... Fa clan chef and women of the Ruu and Rutim.”

It was a strangely muffled voice, hard to make out.

I slowly turned to face the direction it had come from.

“Giba meat that the people of the post town will go so far as to pay coins to eat... And to think, we’ll have a chance to eat such a thing...”

There was a large man seated there, with men seated on his left and right.

The building was a circle, but that seat was undoubtedly at the head. There was a strangely-shaped altar of sorts behind him, and it was decorated with a massive giba skull at its peak.

So this is the head of the Suun clan, Zuuro Suun, huh...?

I was certain of it. The reason for that being that Diga and Doddo Suun were the ones seated on either side of him.

Diga Suun was shooting me a scornful grin. Doddo Suun, meanwhile, was looking at me with eyes like a starving dog. With his sons on either side of him, Zuuro Suun had a creepy smile on his face.

Hmm...

His face didn’t look quite as villainous as I had imagined. But still, there was a sort of bizarre aura about him.

He was a large man. In fact, I’d say he was a size bigger than even Diga Suun. However, he was rather plump, though admittedly not to the degree that Mida Suun was.

There wasn’t a single hair on his head, and his fatty cheeks and eyelids slovenly drooped down. Thanks to that, his mouth looked excessively wide, in total giving his face the impression of a bloated toad.

What he wore was the usual attire at the forest’s edge. However, he had jangling accessories like what women wore on his fatty limbs.

Plus, there was a necklace with a few more horns and tusks than usual dangling in front of his chest. For the

people of the forest's edge, such necklaces were supposed to be proof of a hunter's pride. But at least when it came to this man in particular, it looked more like a symbol of his vanity to me.

I can't imagine him being able to hunt with a physique like that...

Talking about physique alone, that monstrous Mida Suun at least looked like he was able to run, and his arms seemed like they must pack a serious punch. But as for Zuuro Suun, he was remarkably lacking in the sort of commanding presence you would expect of someone with such a large frame. His posture was terrible, and he was leaning a bit to the right as he sat cross-legged. There was a bit of a greasy shine to his little black eyes, but otherwise his expression seemed somehow listless. All in all, he didn't seem even the tiniest bit fitting for his position as the leader of such honorable and hard-working hunters.

"What's the matter, here...? I just applauded you for your good work, didn't I...?" he said in that muffled voice, his large mouth breaking into a faint smile.

"Thanks," I briefly replied. "However, this is a job that we accepted in exchange for payment, so there's no need to worry about words of gratitude, right?" I answered in as calm of a tone as I could manage, only for Zuuro Suun's smile to deepen.

"That's certainly true. I went and said something foolish, there... You can keep working on your preparations for dinner."

"Right. Well then, please excuse us."

With that, we quietly got back to work.

The Suun clan women had all gone back to their houses, so that left just the Ruu and Rutim women to help prepare. Normally, they were all bright and cheerful, but now their expressions had all stiffened, like they had been hit by the oppressive feeling in the air.

"We have to eat in there too, don't we...?" Vina Ruu

muttered with a sigh as we were on our way back to the kitchen from the ritual hall.

"Yeah. That's the custom here at the forest's edge, after all."

However, the Suun women still had to return home and prepare dinner for their own families. I figured that would mean that in order to fulfill the custom that those who make the food share in it in the same place, the branch families would all have to gather here too. But apparently it was alright to stretch the rules in cases like this.

Plus, Yamiru and Mida Suun didn't seem like they'd be coming there either, so it sort of felt like a bit of an anticlimax.

"I still can't exactly get excited about that... Our father and everyone will be there, so we shouldn't be in any danger, but it still feels way too heavy being in there..."

Things were quite touchy between the Suun and the Ruu, as well as their affiliated clans, so it was unsurprising that it was like the air itself had frozen when they were all gathered together.

Still, just how had their battle of words gone during the clan head conference? Had Ai Fa carried out her task successfully in the midst of all that? And if so, just what sort of thoughts and feelings did the clan heads have in response?

The emotional burden we faced having to start dinner without knowing any of that was far from slight.

But even so, we had to carry out our duty.

After carrying in the soup, we brought in the myamuu giba accompanied with aria, thigh meat steak, and spare ribs, one dish after another. Then, we served up a bowl of soup to each person present, finishing the job.

"Asuta, over here," Ai Fa beckoned once we were done, so Vina Ruu and I headed on over.

The Suun clan was seated at the head, but as I looked to the left I saw a ton of familiar faces gathered all together:

Donda Ruu, Darmu Ruu, Dan Rutim, Rau Lea... All ten men of the Ruu and their subordinate clans who were present, and of course Ai Fa.

Mia Lea, Reina Ruu, and everyone else were already seated, and it seemed they had already laid out places for me and Vina Ruu, too.

"Right. I'm just glad we both made it through safely," I whispered while sitting down next to Ai Fa.

She just had the same pout on her face as always, though.

"How did the clan head meeting go...?"

"I cannot say for certain. That Suun clan head just kept saying with a faint grin that it would all have to wait till after tonight's dinner."

So it ended up going that way because we were going to be presenting the food in question shortly, huh?

"What about everything else? There was a chance to complain about Doddo Suun running wild in the post town and that incident at the Rutim banquet, right?"

"That all went the same as always. The Suun clan head spoke evasively and bowed his head at the end, which more or less brought the matter to a close."

Gazraan Rutim had told me in advance that that was their way of doing things. Apparently, whenever their wrongdoings came to light, the Suun clan head would use an apology as his trump card.

It was a method that completely threw all dignity aside.

Still... guys like that can be a real pain to deal with.

People who knew no shame were frightening. I had become painfully aware of that fact ever since I first ran afoul of Doddo Suun.

"Well then, shall we begin this meal...?" the chief of shamelessness himself stated in his muffled voice. "It was prepared by the Fa clan chef we discussed so greatly during the clan head meeting. I hope that you all pay it careful attention as you eat..."

Then, he broke into the familiar chant.

"We offer our gratitude to those of the Fa, Ruu, Suun, and related clans, who manned the flame and gave us our life for this night..."

The majority of the people present were men, so the overall chant had a deeper tone to it than usual.

With that, everyone started picking up their bowls.

Just what will they think about it...?

This was no mere dinner. In a way, it was like I was taking part in a cooking competition.

I was trying to bring about a revolution in terms of giba meat, through the processes of bloodletting and dissection. I wanted to steadily make it to a point where such meat could be exchanged for money... And to prepare for that, the Fa clan was currently running stalls in the post town with the assistance of the Ruu and Rutim. That was the information we were presenting alongside this meal.

It was going to be a battle, where the Suun, Ruu, and other smaller clans' heads would fumble to voice their thoughts and feelings.

"Hey, Morun, why'd I only get one serving of ribs...? There's no way that'll be enough to fill me," Dan Rutim grumbled in a lowered voice.

"We made 130 people's worth of food today, you know. Just preparing one for each person was already a big undertaking, so don't go complaining."

"No, but...!"

"Ugh, alright already. I'll give you mine, so stop throwing a fit... But I'll be taking your myamuu meat in exchange, alright?"

What a harmonious back and forth. It really was heartening, seeing how boldly open they were being despite the situation.

Just when I was thinking of offering Dan Rutim my ribs too and turned to do so, though, a voice rang out.

"Man, I was wondering what it'd be like after you all went

on and on about it, but this giba meat's nothing special," Diga Suun stated. Then, in his same sluggish tone as always, the Suun heir continued, "Did you really earn over a hundred white coins with this? I just can't believe it."

Hmm, I thought to myself.

I had figured the Suun clan were going to choose to either slander my cooking or give it high praise, but that was how they were starting their attack, huh?

"Eldest son of the Suun, Diga Suun, is that a question pointed at the Fa clan? Or were you simply talking to yourself? If it was a question, then I'm prepared to answer it."

With that, his stagnant gaze locked firmly onto me.

My first time seeing Diga Suun was the very day Ai Fa picked me up deep in the forest, as he had been waiting near the Fa house. That made him the second person of the forest's edge I had met. Less than a month later, we met again. This was during the Rutim banquet at the Ruu settlement, when he came charging in alongside his brothers. That made this our third meeting... But still, I didn't feel any fear at seeing him. I just felt once again that he was an arrogant and devious man.

"Right... The Fa clan head only said that you had earned over 100 white coins over the course of ten days... I'd like to hear a bit more about that in detail..." his father replied.

"Alright," I answered, putting down my wooden plate. "First off, in regards to the question of if that's true or not, I can confirm that it is. Over ten days I managed to sell over 1000 meals for more than 200 white coins. After subtracting our expenses, I earned 123 white coins, or roughly 100 giba's worth of horns and tusks."

The clan heads had been eating in silence, but now there was just a bit of murmuring among them.

And so, I kept on giving my report, taking care to not sound like I was bragging.

"However, I didn't prepare enough meals on the first

several days, so I wasn't able to sell as many as I could have. Lately, I've been selling around 150 meals a day on average, earning between 17 and 18 white coins in the process... On top of that, starting two days from now, I'm scheduled to start selling my cooking to an inn. Adding those profits, I expect to make over 20 white coins a day."

"20 white coins in one day... Numbers like that certainly are hard to believe," Zuuro Suun said with a chuckle.

"However, that was because you're a foreigner running this shop, isn't it...? But would the people of Genos, with their hatred and fear of the people of the forest's edge, really buy such giba meat from us...?"

"Naturally, it will take a long time to forge that sort of relationship. But still, I've been having the Ruu women help me man the stalls in the post town. I believe that by growing accustomed to the proper form of the people of the forest's edge through them, any unfounded discrimination and fears will eventually be washed away," I said, putting as much strength into my gaze as I could manage.

My intention was to solely mention what was unfounded in order to give the unspoken implication that the existence of people of the forest's edge truly acting improperly would hurt their ability to gain a greater fortune.

However, Zuuro Suun's faint smile didn't shift in the least.

Well, if it were that easy to get them to reform their ways, then we wouldn't have any problem at all. And so, I gave a stealthy sigh.

"Of course, I understand that some of you may not approve of the people of the forest's edge becoming involved with the Genos townsfolk in such a manner. But at the very least, I hope you all can understand that the Fa clan isn't doing such things solely to amass a fortune for ourselves."

"Hmm... The matter of trying to bring greater prosperity to the forest's edge, is it...?"

What was going on? I couldn't read what this Zuuro Suun guy was thinking in the least.

That faint smile remained plastered on his toad-like face, and his voice sounded somehow ridiculing, but I couldn't sense much ill will or even interest in general from him.

If he displayed a clear fixation on money like Tsuvai Suun, for example, he would be a whole lot easier to deal with. But since I didn't know what he was plotting, I found it hard to know what I should strongly assert.

Seriously, just what did he summon me all the way to the Suun settlement for...?

Zuuro Suun just kept on faintly smiling away as he ate.

Diga Suun chuckled foolishly as he chewed into his meat.

And as for Doddo Suun... I actually hadn't been keeping a close eye on him, but he seemed to be eating properly. Now he was just chugging down fruit wine, though.

"But still... Is fortune really something we need...?" Zuuro Suun eventually asked, his voice sounding like he had something stuck in his throat. "Fortune leads to corruption... As the leader of our people I occasionally have dealings with the residents of the city of stone, so I understand the truth of those words more clearly than anyone here... Too much fortune is like bad wine, and will lead a person to fall prey to depravity..."

I was astounded at the audacity of him saying such things. Still, I doubted I would get anywhere by getting angry at the Suun clan here and now. And so, I held my tongue, but there was one person who couldn't stand staying silent: the Rutim clan head, Dan Rutim.

"If you understand all that then why do you keep the reward money from Genos all to yourselves, O leader of our people, Zuuro Suun? If too much fortune's like rotten booze, then why not throw it back in their faces?"

He actually hadn't raised his voice all that much, but it was readily apparent from his tone just how displeased he was. And then, he took a big bite into the ribs he was

holding.

Apparently, Ama Min Rutim had given him a third serving.

“That’s a foolish question, Dan Rutim,” a young voice responded. However, it hadn’t come from a member of the Suun clan. No, it came from someone diagonally behind me: the Lea clan head, Rau Lea. “Can’t you understand our leader’s compassion? Since it’s bad wine, they’re drinking it all down themselves so it can’t hurt us. You should at least be able to figure out that much.”

“Oh, so that’s it,” Dan Rutim replied with a hearty laugh.

Instantly, a dark, overwhelming bloodlust filled the air, coming from the left of the Suun clan.

“Clan heads of the Lea and Rutim! You intend to slander our leading clan yet again, without any proof? How many times must it be explained to you that that money is being used to protect the Genos fields?!”

That had come from the large men wearing giba heads.



The brawniest looking of the group continued on in a voice so thick it'd be a match for Donda Ruu's, "As you yourselves just said, we of the forest's edge have no need for such a fortune, which is why our leaders have used it to hire townsfolk to gather wood and construct a wall to protect the Genos fields. There's no logic to you slandering them for that!"

"Isn't that claim the one that's utterly unfounded, clan head of the Zaza? You ramble off that same excuse year after year, and I've gotten sick of hearing it," Dan Rutim calmly replied while continuing to bite into his ribs. With that, that Zaza clan head only grew more enraged.

"I saw the wall being constructed with my own eyes! But such a wall requires dozens of men from Genos to build, and a massive amount of time and money!"

A wall to protect the fields...? Was such a thing seriously being built? In that case... then why was Dora the vegetable seller suffering so much?

"They're talking about the fields to the north of the castle... Granny Jiba told me once that there are firm wooden walls there to protect the fields of those who live in the castle walls," Ai Fa whispered to me.

Ah, so that was it. The townsfolk's fields were to the south of the castle, but such walls weren't built that far down, so the starving giba gathered there.

"So they insist the Suun clan is investing the reward money to build such walls... There's no chance that's true, is there?" I whispered back to her, as quietly as I could so no one around us would hear.

"There isn't," Ai Fa replied with a shake of her head. "The walls around the nobles' fields have been completed for decades now according to Granny Jiba. Of course, when a starving giba manages to damage one, they still need to repair it, though."

"Right..."

"Besides, Granny Jiba laughed at the idea, saying there

was no way such splendid walls could be constructed with such meager reward money from the town."

So in the end, the Zaza clan head had been fooled by the Suun clan, huh? I couldn't help but sigh at the audacity of trying to trick someone as frightening as him.

Seriously, everyone here has faces every bit as scary as Donda Ruu's...

Still, they really were representative of the people of the forest's edge.

Their presence and vitality were like those of wild animals. An upright and hardworking clan of hunters... the Zaza, Dom, and Jeen may all fall under the Suun, but they seemed more than bold and daring enough to be worthy of being called hunters of the forest's edge.

And yet, the Zaza clan head was currently glaring at Dan Rutim and Rau Lea with deep, burning anger in his eyes.

"Excess fortune leads to corruption! And so, we shouldn't bring such unneeded wealth here to the forest's edge, and instead use it up to protect the Genos fields! What sort of objection could you possibly have to our leader's decision?!"

"I would have none at all, assuming those words were true. But I've been stretching out my neck like one of those totos birds from the post town all this time, wondering just how many years it will take for that supposed wall to be completed, clan head of the Zaza."

Even when responding as such, Dan Rutim still didn't look like he was getting all worked up. In fact, he looked like he might even yawn with boredom as he waited for a response.

There had surely been such exchanges repeated over and over throughout the clan head meeting. The Ruu affiliated clans would point out the leading clan's faults, and the clans under the Suun would defend them. I couldn't help but feel that the Suun clan's control was quite tenuous, considering this delicate power balance.

Donda Ruu didn't add to the unproductive back and

forth, but there was a fierce blaze burning in his eyes as he chugged down fruit wine.

It really seems like a dangerous way of doing things...

If the Ruu and Suun were to fight, it could apparently turn into a war that split the forest's edge down the middle. However, that was ultimately just down to the clans under them. If the Suun didn't have the capable Zaza and Jeen and the like under them, I couldn't imagine them ever possibly being a match for the Ruu.

But if the Suun clan was using lies to earn the trust of their subordinate clans, then weren't they just building a house of cards?

The Suun's method is full of holes. Couldn't someone like me or Kamyua easily use just a bit of cunning to cause it all to come tumbling down? I couldn't help but think.

Of course, it was a bad idea to get overly conceited. But still, the Suun clan was being way too sloppy in how they were doing things.

As that thought ran through my head, though, a sudden rebuke came my way.

"And so, I cannot see the Fa clan's actions of trying to bring excess fortune to the forest's edge as anything but an attempt to invite the downfall of our people!" I instantly looked up, and saw the Zaza clan head glaring at me and Ai Fa. "It's one thing to invite a foreigner into your clan, and use his skills to earn coins. There are no laws on record against such things here at the forest's edge... But if you intend to use that fortune to ruin us all, then I will take up my blade and strike you down myself!"

All of a sudden, the ball was in our court.

No, wait... That wasn't it. They must have felt this way all this time, as they surely heard what Ai Fa had to say during the clan head meeting.

Excess fortune could lead the people of the forest's edge down the path of corruption... That was exactly the fear I had before opening the shop in town.

The ones to smash that worry to smithereens were Gazraan Rutim and Ai Fa.

As for Ai Fa, she sat up straight and shot a commanding glare right back at the Zaza clan head.

“Excess fortune will corrupt the people of the forest’s edge... Is that what you think, clan head of the Zaza?”

“That’s right. If you want to earn coins with giba meat, then do that as much as you please. Just don’t spread that fortune throughout the forest’s edge! Well... If the Ruu and Rutim are going to come wagging their tails at you, though, it may be necessary to throw a few coins their way. I suppose we can overlook that much.”

“Oh...?” Dan Rutim questioned, his massive frame quaking. He had a big grin on his face, but the boiling rage was clearly building up in his goggle-eyes. “You certainly say some interesting things, clan head of the Zaza. Are you implying we solely formed a bond with the Fa out of a desire for money?”

“Are you saying I’m wrong? But what other reason could the Rutim have for doing so, when they have no blood ties to the Fa?”

“Because the Fa and Rutim are friends!” he loudly proclaimed in his rough voice, pounding his right fist into the floor. It was a dirt floor covered with a rug, yet the blow still clearly sunk into it. “Blood bonds hold more weight than anything else, but they aren’t everything! But I suppose since you just follow along under the Suun as good little underlings, you wouldn’t understand!”

“You bastard?! You dare insult our leading clan again?!”

The air in the room had ignited in an instant. The one to put it out wasn’t Donda Ruu or Zuuro Suun, though... It was Ai Fa.

“Clan heads of the Rutim and Zaza, I ask you to calm yourselves a bit. The key point is the idea of excess fortune, is it not?”

There was an intense light shining in Ai Fa’s eyes. And

yet, her voice and expression remained perfectly calm.

Ai Fa gave a nod to silence the raging Dan Rutim, and turned to face the Zaza clan head. Then, she started speaking in a quiet tone.

2

“Excess fortune will bring about the downfall of the forest’s edge... I can certainly understand that line of thinking, but I most certainly didn’t start this with such a goal in mind,” Ai Fa stated, her voice faltering a bit. “I simply wished to bring prosperity here to the forest’s edge. If we bring those among us suffering in poverty better lives, will it not grant more strength to our people and allow us to carry out our duty as hunters better than ever before?”

The Zaza clan head replied, “Hmph! But is that really the case? If you can earn more coins than before for each giba, then it will become possible to keep on living without hunting many. That’s the corruption I’m talking about!”

“But they can’t do their job as hunters if they starve to death either, now can they? It’s one thing for large clans like the Zaza, Jeen, and Dom, but for weak and small families, they need a bit more than what they have.”

“If they lack strength, then they’ll simply meet their end in the forest... That is how we’ve cultivated our skills as hunters,” a low voice interjected. That had come from a large man who had been silently listening to what his compatriots had to say up till now. He wore a giba skill on his head, and belonged to the Dom clan. “Weak hunters aren’t fit to live. When only strong hunters survive, they pass on stronger blood. If unnecessary fortune allows the weak to pass on their blood as well, that may well bring about our destruction.”

“But what is unnecessary fortune? Why do we allow others to decide for us that the fortune from tusks, horns,

and pelts is acceptable, but coins earned from meat are not?" There was a flickering blue light in Ai Fa's eyes.

"Horns, tusks, pelts, and meat all come to us from the giba. So can you explain what the difference between them may be, clan head of the Dom?"

"For 80 years now, we have exchanged horns, tusks, and pelts for coins... That is my answer."

"But isn't that simply because we had no means of exchanging meat for coins? I don't believe it's right to just throw away that fortune now that we do have such a means." Ai Fa was giving off as much intensity as the intimidating Dom clan head, but she went ahead and softened her tone ever so slightly. "Clan head of the Dom, last night, I spoke with Jiba Ruu, the oldest of us living here at the forest's edge."

"And what of it, clan head of the Fa...?"

"I had a doubt. The townsfolk earn coins from both the meat and pelt of an animal called a karon. And yet, we people of the forest's edge only sell giba pelts, while we throw the meat away in the forest. I wished to know why that was."

This was my first time hearing of this. But thanks to that, we were now able to hear an unfamiliar tale from the past of the forest's edge.

"In the past, Jiba Ruu and our other ancestors lived in the black forest of Jagar. The only animals that existed there were large man-eating black apes, as well as small snakes and lizards... However, there was a strong taboo against eating the ape's meat, as it devoured our people, and so they survived by eating snakes, lizards, and bugs."

"That much has been passed down in the Dom clan as well. But our ancestors kept on hunting the apes to protect their families, and became skilled hunters in the process, correct?"

"That's right. And our ancestors peeled the pelts from those apes and wore them, as symbols of their pride..."

Thanks to that, they knew how to skin pelts, but not how to properly prepare and eat meat.”

Any murmuring that remained fell silent.

“Eventually, our ancestors were driven from the south here to the Morga forest’s edge, and began hunting giba instead of black apes... And though they began eating meat, they didn’t search for ways to properly prepare it. From what Jiba Ruu said, they were happy and fulfilled simply being able to eat the flesh of a beast.”

“What does all that matter? Doesn’t that mean simply eating meat should be plenty for us, too?”

“That’s wrong... Or at least, that’s what I believe.”

Ai Fa was surely remembering Jiba Ruu’s face from the night prior. Her gaze was always so mysterious, full of seemingly bottomless sadness, yet also a sliver of hope.

“Jiba Ruu said that may have simply been down to their complacency. They refused interaction with the townsfolk and didn’t try to figure out why they were unable to sell giba meat, and then 80 years went and passed... She looked like she deeply regretted that fact.”

“What reason should she have for regret? There’s no need for our ancestors to feel that way. We’re only here now because they showed us the way.”

“That’s why Jiba Ruu feels regret, for being unable to show us a better, more prosperous way. And for the fact that if they had, perhaps so many of our ancestors wouldn’t have lost their lives.”

When they moved here to the forest’s edge, there were over 1000 of them. And yet, half of them died in the very first year. That was thanks to both fighting the vicious giba and simple starvation. I had heard that from Jiba Ruu on the very first night that I met her.

“The townsfolk had likely known the proper way to eat meat from the very start. If our ancestors had formed proper bonds instead of avoiding them, we may well have been able to exchange giba meat for coins all along. Jiba Ruu said

their crime was failing to put in that effort, inviting a situation where poverty and starvation are common here at the forest's edge."

I think I could've heard a pin drop after that.

"I cannot firmly declare that your assertion of excess fortune leading to corruption is mistaken, clan head of the Dom. But even so, I believe in the possibility that such fortune can give our weak brethren strength, and bring prosperity here to the forest's edge." With that, Ai Fa glanced over at me. "This all may sound unbelievable, but I believe it to be possible with Asuta's strength... His cooking is delicious, isn't it?"

No one answered.

Even so, there was a gentle look in Ai Fa's eyes, and she even smiled ever so slightly.

"I feel that it's incredibly tasty. And so, I wish to continue down the path I believe in... I would greatly appreciate it if you were to accompany me on that journey."

A silence washed over the ritual hall.

At first I thought that was because most of the people present were still eating, but nobody even seemed to be moving.

The Suun, the Ruu, and the clans under them... Even the women who manned the stove and the heads of the small clans all seemed to be holding their breath...

And then, that silence was suddenly broken.

"The Fou clan stands in agreement with the clan head of the Fa."

Everyone slowly turned that way.

There was a man standing in the corner of the ritual hall.

"The Fou clan is small. We don't have many relatives, and we are unable to hunt a sufficient number of giba."

His black hair was unkempt, and he had a beard of the same color. He was tall yet slender, and looked to be somewhere in his 40s.

"We have enough meat to eat, but we're always lacking

horns and tusks. We were blessed with a young child, and yet he has been on the verge of starvation. But if we had just a bit more to work with, my family surely wouldn't have to suffer so."

His blue eyes were blazing in the dim light. They were full of swirling, fierce emotions, brought on by his pride as a hunter and his feeling of helplessness.

"We don't need charity from the city of stone. But if we can obtain coins for the giba caught by our hands, then I believe that's fair and just. And I swear here and now that if we can gain more strength as a result, we will devote that to working even harder as hunters... And so, the Fou clan stands in agreement with the words of the clan head of the Fa."

"The Ratsu clan does as well," another man proclaimed while standing up, this time from the opposite direction. He looked like he wasn't even 20 yet. "In this past year, we lost two of our affiliated clans, the Mei and Geem. And the clan head of the Mei was a particularly gallant hunter, but an ill wind blew upon a small wound and he fell ill, then died soon after... If we had even a bit to spare, we could have bought medicine to heal him from the post town."

His gaze was filled with rage, and was intently fixated on the Dom clan head.

"Clan head of the Dom, according to what you said, then it's only right that the Mei and Geem met with ruin. I cannot abide that, and instead stand in agreement with the words of the Fa's clan head."

"There's no need to raise your voice so loudly. It's not as if even the Dom clan head is saying he wishes for the smaller clans to all die out," a hoarse voice chimed in as yet another person stood. He was a skinny old man, with white hair like Jiba Ruu's. "All together, there are around 300 of us belonging to small clans with no ties to the Suun or Ruu. As if anyone could think it would be acceptable for all of us to simply die out. If that happened, it would never be possible

to hunt down a satisfactory number of giba.”

“Elder of the Sauti... You’re not saying you also agree with the Fa clan, are you?” the Zaza clan head questioned, breaking his long stretch of silence. His eyes were positively ablaze as he glared at the old man.

“That’s a matter for the clan head to decide. However, to an old man like me, our elder’s words have a powerful sting to them. That is, the thought that because we chose our path poorly, you young folks have ended up on such a roundabout route...”

The man had a rather gentle look in his eyes for a person of the forest’s edge. And that calm gaze soon shifted from the Zaza clan head to me and Ai Fa.

“The townsfolk shunned us, and we did the same to them. That may have been an unavoidable fate, but I can’t honestly say that we put in the effort to fight against it... But I think that perhaps you of the Fa clan are trying to carve out that path in our place.”

“What can a foreigner like that do?!”

“He can form bonds with the people of the post town. And I’d have to say he’s the only one here at the forest’s edge now who can do such a thing.”

The old-timer remained perfectly calm, while the look on the Zaza clan head’s face was only growing more and more vicious.

“So now it’s not just the Ruu and their ilk. Even the Sauti are going to slander our leading clan? The Suun clan are the ones who tie together the city of stone and the forest’s edge!”

“It’s the castle that the Suun clan interact with though, isn’t it? The residents of the castle and the post town are entirely different... And it’s truly unfortunate, but the Suun clan has not had a proper relationship with the townsfolk. Or did the second son of the main house not just recently draw his blade in town?”

“That was because a man from town was slandering the

people of the forest's edge...!"

"There's no law that states a blade is a fitting punishment for slander, is there, clan head of the Zaza?"

I was more than a little surprised to hear someone unrelated to the Ruu come out and so openly admonish the Suun clan.

The old-timer broke out in a gentle smile and looked back our way.

"An old bag of bones like me lacks the strength to decide the path the Sauti will take. But personally, I'm truly grateful to see folks like you, members of the Fa clan."

"In that case, leave things to your clan head and stop talking, Elder Moga," the youth by the oldtimer's side chimed in, wearily standing up. He was incredibly large, and his appearance overall was a match for Jiza Ruu and Gazraan Rutim. "I am the clan head of the Sauti, Dari Sauti, and I have one question I'd like to ask. Ruu clan head Donda Ruu, what are your thoughts on this matter?"

Donda Ruu had remained firmly silent up to this point, but now he slowly turned his glare towards the youth.

"The clan head of the Rutim called the Fa friends. However, it's the Ruu women who are lending their strength, isn't it? Like the leader of the Rutim, do the Ruu also share the same will and see the Fa as friends?"

"I've got no particular intention of calling them my friends," Donda Ruu grumbled in a low voice as he rose to his feet. "Why should I need to say that about a foolish woman who plays at being a hunter and some mysterious foreigner?"

"Then why did you loan them your women? Were you just after the coins?" Dari Sauti asked, his voice full of doubt as he tilted his head.

Glaring down at the simple expression on the youth's face, Donda Ruu answered, "Giba meat being able to be exchanged for coins... That sounds like nothing but a fairy tale to me, and I can't imagine the townsfolk having a

change of heart anytime soon. I'm just loaning them the women in exchange for a fair price."

"I see. In that case—"

"But if that fairy tale comes true, it'll bring even greater strength to the people of the forest's edge," Donda Ruu stated in his heavy voice, his words cutting off the youth like a hatchet. His eyes started blazing fiercely, and his mouth shifted into a daring smile. "Excess fortune will cause the people of the forest's edge to fall... As if something that ridiculous could ever happen. The fools who think that way are the true threats to our people."

"What did you just say...?" the Zaza and Jeen clan heads chimed in, clearly getting worked up.

"If you Zaza and Jeen were given a hundred coins, would you just fool around and not hunt any giba till you used that all up?"

"Don't mock us! Just how much do you intend on ridiculing our clans, clan head of the Ruu?!"

"If that pisses you off, then that's your answer right there, isn't it?" Donda Ruu said, grinning once again.

He had been frowning an awful lot of the time lately, but now that I thought about it, this was more his natural temperament. Like a raging inferno, he overwhelmed his opponents while wearing a grin on his face, forcing them into submission.

"I wasn't ridiculing you. You're the ones who were doing that to all of us, clan head of the Zaza. Excess fortune leads to corruption, you say? Anyone that happens to wasn't a real hunter to begin with! Someone like that has no right to live here at the forest's edge!"

"But...!"

"And if any do fall, then we've just got to drive them out of the forest's edge. Then the order of this place will be maintained just fine."

From the big grin he was wearing, it was clear that Donda Ruu was seriously enjoying himself.

And of course, what he was saying served as a scathing criticism of the Suun clan, as well as a declaration of war.

The Zaza clan head and his group were utterly ignorant of that as they listened to Donda Ruu's words with stern expressions, though.

"The Ruu clan doesn't need any more fortune than what we've got. It's the same for the Rutim and Lea, too... But the Ririm and Muufa are still lacking in strength. If we don't help out the clans under us, they could go the way of the Mei and Geem."

The other clan heads were silent.

"The Ruu have gone and gained more fortune regardless through this chain of events. And thanks to loaning the women to the Fa, there aren't enough around to skin pelts, so we've given them to the Ririn and Muufa... Isn't that what prosperity means? Eh, clan head of the Zaza?"

Sure enough, the man had no answer.

"We haven't gathered enough coins to cause the downfall of the people of the forest's edge. But I'd say that concern should be put aside until there's not a single person left starving to death, wouldn't you say?"

"Then you really are saying you are in agreement with the Fa clan, Donda Ruu?" Dari Sauti interjected.

The smile like a wild beast disappeared from Donda Ruu's face, and he just plain looked irritated.

"I already told you, right? I don't believe in that fairy tale."

"But—"

"But if that comes true, our people will be able to gain even greater power... In that case, it makes no sense to me to get in the way of that."

"Good grief..." I heard someone mutter quietly from behind me. I stole a glance back that way, and found Mia Lea Ruu giving a strained smile. "Our clan head sure is stubborn, huh?" was written all over her face.

"Hmm... It truly is an intriguing matter," a muffled voice

chimed in, sounding rather out of tune. That had come from Zuuro Suun, of course.

Donda Ruu's burning gaze pointed back that way.

"But still... It will take quite a bit of time before such a thing can be realized, won't it? Selling not just cooking, but the meat itself is certainly no ordinary challenge... And so, why don't we take things slowly and watch how everything develops for now...?"

It was a completely ridiculous statement. After all that passionate arguing, that was going to be the result?

It seemed like he wasn't trying to settle anything. Not even a single issue.

"How ridiculous. I hadn't ever figured anyone but the Ruu would fall for the Fa clan's smooth talking," Diga Suun added in his usual sluggish tone. "The Fou and the Ratsu... Seems like it'd be good to make sure we remember those names, huh?"

Those clan heads were still standing, and now their eyes were shooting daggers at Diga Suun.

It was then that I started to feel a rage rising inside me, but I didn't get a chance to act on it. That was because someone with a lower boiling point than me yelled out, "Hey!" in a rough voice first. "What was that statement just now, eldest son of the Suun?! Is there some law here at the forest's edge that states you mustn't form bonds with the Fa?! You know, there's such a thing as too much unjust resentment, you scum!" Dan Rutim exploded.

A thick vein was bulging on his bald head, and his goggle-eyes were alight with rage.

Yeah... The heads of small clans had likely avoided having any connection with the Fa so as not to catch the eyes of the Suun, but now after two years they were trying to overturn that decision.

There was no way this fire was going to be put out.

"Wh-What do you mean, 'scum'? What right does someone like you have to call me that, clan head of the

Rutim?" he asked with a foolish smile as his face started twitching. Perhaps the trauma of having a hundred kilo giba corpse thrown at him back at the Rutim banquet was coming back to him.

With that, I looked over everyone else. And unsurprisingly, Zuuro Suun and the clan heads who fell under him all had unpleasant looks on their faces. Zuuro Suun likely didn't want any trouble, but the other clan heads couldn't have been very interested in standing up for Diga Suun's wrongdoings.

There was no doubt that like Donda Ruu, they found a female hunter like Ai Fa and a foreigner like me who had joined the Fa clan annoying at best. And thanks to their own principals and thoughts, they stood firmly opposed to the idea of gathering excess fortune.

But even if they held great trust in the leading clan, they had to see how outrageous it was that on the night Ai Fa lost her father, Diga Suun broke into her house without permission and assaulted her.

Diga Suun didn't seem to understand that in the least, though. He was just throwing around his authority as a member of the leading clan, never stopping to think what that may or may not allow him to get away with.

That was what made him such a small fry.

I even thought, *Maybe all we need to do is just wait for leadership of the clan to pass from Zuuro to Diga Suun?*

If Diga Suun were to become the leader of the forest's edge, it probably wouldn't take him all that long to lose the trust of the Dom and Zaza. Then the Suun clan would collapse all on its own, without Donda Ruu needing to swing a blade or me needing to employ any cleverness.

It's an incredibly passive plan, but then again, that may be the most peaceful way to resolve things...

As that thought ran through my head, the current clan head Zuuro Suun just said, "Now, now," while looking towards Dan Rutim. "You don't need to raise your voice so

much, clan head of the Rutim... Are you talking about the rumors from two years ago? What point is there to bringing up such an old matter now...?"

"Then you better sew your bungling son's mouth shut! Just hearing his voice alone is enough to disgust me!"

Dan Rutim thumped back down, and his right hand seemed to be fumbling around without him really thinking about it. Seeing that, I stealthily pushed over my plate, for Dan Rutim to somehow precisely grab the ribs while continuing to glare at the Suun clan the whole time. It was the least I could do for him, considering he spoke up in my stead.

"The Fou and Ratsu aren't names worth memorizing... No, the name you should be paying attention to is the Sudra," a gloomy sounding voice chimed in. It had come from a man who wasn't all that large and was seated about as far away from the Suun clan as possible. "The Sudra clan also stands in agreement with the Fa... We're in need of a bit more lately, too."

Then, another man a bit removed also stood.

"The Gaaz clan stands with the Fa as well... At first I didn't understand at all what you meant about giba meat tasting good or bad, but after eating this food, my feelings have changed... I certainly believe that this could be sold to the people of the town for coins."

A number of others had stood, looking like they were going to join in, but Zuuro Suun hurriedly interjected, "Please wait, clan heads... I really don't believe we should be trying to decide whether or not the Fa clan's actions are justified here and now... After all, as I said before, it will still take some time to see if all that will bear fruit... And so, why don't we take things slow and just watch what happens...?"

"In other words, as the leader of our people, you have no intention of objecting to the Fa clan's actions at this time?" Dari Sauti interjected. "But what do you have to say about the fact that it's the clan heads of those under you like the

Zaza and the Dom who are complaining?”

“Naturally, I believe what they are saying is logical and proper, and personally I feel we cannot ignore the danger presented by excess fortune... But as the clan head of the Ruu stated, the idea of giba meat coming to hold such value sounds like nothing but a fairy tale... And so, I can’t see any point to us fighting amongst ourselves over something so trivial...” With that, Zuuro Suun’s greasy gaze turned towards the angry clan heads who fell under him. “Clan heads of the Zaza, Jeen, and Dom... Will you follow my request and lay down your blades...? We could very well throw the forest’s edge into chaos just by trying to determine if the Fa clan will bring about our downfall or our prosperity...”

“We will abide by your wishes,” the clan heads replied, holding back their emotions and sitting back down.

Upon seeing this, Donda Ruu also sat.

The Fou, Ratsu, Sudra, and Gaaz clan heads followed along, as did the Sauti clan head and elder, and the heated air seemed to chill.

“We should be able to see some sort of results by the next clan head meeting... Until then, you may go ahead and act according to your wishes, Fa clan head and chef...”

Ai Fa nodded back with a calm look on her face.

“Hey, what’s going on here...?” Vina Ruu whispered, grabbing the sleeve of my t-shirt. “At this rate, nothing’s going to be resolved, right...?”

“Hmm, I don’t know... In a way, you might actually be able to say that this settles everything.”

Now that I thought about it, the Suun clan head had pretty much gone ahead and told us, “Just do as you please for the time being.” Thanks to that, scary folks like the Zaza and Dom wouldn’t be able to complain any further. At least, as long as there was no clear proof of us bringing about corruption.

Honestly, I couldn’t help but wonder if it was alright for

things to wrap up so soon.

Seriously, though... Is Zuuro Suun really such a complete and utter opportunist?

At the very least, I wish we could have taken a majority vote.

Four clans, including the Fou and Ratsu, had voiced their agreement, but there were 37 clan heads present, including the Suun. If we could figure out how many were opposed to our plan, it would be highly useful information to have. And yet, the conclusion was to wait a year. In that way, we seemed to have come up short.

Seriously, had anyone ever heard of someone so forcefully dodging a matter?

Donda Ruu kept on sipping his fruit wine, looking clearly displeased. Dan Rutim, meanwhile, looked almost bored as he gnawed on a white bone. From looking at them, you could tell that they were both firmly prepared for if it ever came to violence. I was certainly glad that it hadn't, but that meant there was nothing for them to hit.

Maybe their request that I man the stove really was just to calm down Mida Suun... Is that actually possible?

Yamiru Suun was giving off some serious malice that made me think she had to be planning something, but I couldn't sense anything at all from Zuuro Suun. He just seemed dim-witted, lazy, and utterly lethargic. It was like he irresponsibly just thought that if the current peace could be maintained, then nothing else mattered.

Was that Zuuro Suun's true nature?

So was Yamiru Suun actually the one pulling all the strings...? No, if the clan head meeting ends like this, she won't be able to make any real moves. And if Diga or Doddo Suun interfere with our business, they'd be going against their clan head's decision... Seriously, just what's going on here?

Zuuro Suun had a thin smile on his face, looking incredibly pleased.

Diga Suun was sulking a bit.

Doddo Suun was just silently drinking down booze.

Did we... or I guess I should say I, overestimate what we were up against?

When we opened the lid and peeked inside, did the Suun clan really turn out to just be nothing but a gathering of petty lowlives?

I didn't know. I really didn't, and yet... The dinner continued on without any real disturbances, and solemnly came to a close.

That also signaled the end of the clan head meeting, so the members of the Suun clan all headed back to their houses. As for the rest of us, we were all to sleep crammed together in here.

If we could just make it through the night, we would be able to return to our nostalgic old home.

Of course, it can't just end like this... I thought to myself while cleaning up after the dinner.

Even if the Suun clan really were nothing but a gathering of petty lowlives, we couldn't simply leave them be.

If Diga Suun were to take over, they were sure to destroy themselves, but who knows how many years of waiting that would require. No, this was already at the point where it wasn't just the settlement at the forest's edge's problem.

The sight and words of folks like Milano Mas, Dora, and Yumi swirled around in my head. Even if they could trust me and the people around me, they still couldn't forgive the people of the forest's edge as a whole... That was a feeling they all shared. As long as there were people of the forest's edge who had forgotten their honor and did as they pleased, it wouldn't be possible for the people of Genos to truly reach an understanding with them.

Plus, we had met the women of the Suun branch families. They had eyes like rotten fish, and we surely couldn't just leave them be. Even if this night ended smoothly, there were still a mountain of problems left to deal with.

Well, that's all a matter for tomorrow... I thought to myself. It was rather carefree, but that was what was running through my head.

This is entirely in retrospect, but looking back, the real ordeal at the Suun settlement wouldn't bare its fangs until the night fell.

3

"Well then, I leave the rest to you, Darmu," Donda Ruu said before exiting the ritual hall, taking all the women but Ai Fa along with him.

Though the clan heads would all be sleeping in a huddle, it would be a bit much to make the women all join in, too. And so, they were assigned a vacant house to stay in.

There was also some concern about sending the women there all on their own, so Donda Ruu ended up accompanying them.

"Wouldn't it be better to have you two come along with us as well...?" Mia Lea Ruu had insisted, worried about us until the very end, but we ultimately decided to stay here in the ritual hall.

It was true that a house where the door could be bolted seemed safer, but on the other hand, Diga and Doddo Suun could ignore what their clan head said and try something. With that in mind, it seemed a lot safer to stay here in the ritual hall, where the clan heads under the Suun would be watching.

Plus, all the fierce warriors aside from Donda Ruu would be staying here.

There were thirteen men here like Dan Rutim and Rau Lea, and a large number of neutral hunters of the forest's edge around us. Even if the Suun clan was plotting something, it seemed physically impossible for them to break through this wall of muscle, no matter how shameless

they may be.

On top of any questions of safety, there was also another reason for us to stay here: interacting with the other clans.

The clan heads who declared they were in agreement and those who were interested split off into a group, wanting to hear what we had to say.

The Sauti clan head Dari Sauti and elder Moga Sauti acted as their representatives.

“The Sauti live at the far south of the forest’s edge. Ours is a long bloodline that leads five clans so, well, you can think of us as the next biggest clan after the Suun and Ruu.” Dari Sauti’s square face had a definite rustic simplicity to it, and he wore a smile as he offered that introduction.

“Therefore, we can’t go lightly giving the Suun or Ruu our backing. If we were to place ourselves under either side, the power balance between those two clans would shift significantly... In terms of position though, our settlement is closer to the Ruu, so the Suun clan is incredibly cautious about us.”



"I see..."

"We have no intention of causing the forest's edge to fall into chaos. And so, we've been careful not to get involved with either the Suun or the Ruu... Plus, to be honest, we're a little disappointed by how they quarrel with one another despite the fact that we are all people of the forest's edge. My honest feelings are that I'd prefer they just shut up already and hunt giba."

The clans under the Ruu were seated a bit further away and had started drinking and making merry. I could hear Dan Rutim giving a real hearty laugh.

"But even putting all that aside, we can't simply ignore this matter of the Fa clan's actions. And so, we'd like to hear what you have to say, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan."

Gathered around Dari Sauti were the clan heads under him, as well as those of the small clans like the Fou and Ratsu.

Removing the Fa, the Ruu and the seven clans under them, and the Suun plus their eight subordinate clans, that left 21 smaller clans, and it looked like around 80% of them were gathered here. I'm sure not all of them would agree with us, but still, they must have wanted to hear the details.

"We heard that the Ruu and the clans under them had already learned this bloodletting technique from the Fa, but is it something that anyone can learn? And... if we do learn it, will all of our giba meat taste like what we ate today?"

"Yes. Of course, it's not always successful, but it's not all that tricky to do. The Ruu and Rutim only needed a few days to master it, and it's not like I've even prepared all that many giba myself, to be honest... By the way, what did you think of the food's taste?"

"It was delicious. Honestly, I was so surprised that I thought my heart was about to stop on me," Dari Sauti stated, scratching his head with his thick fingers. "Anyway, even ignoring anything about selling it in the post town and the like, I'd like to learn that technique. However, the Sauti

settlement is at the southern tip, so it's far from all the other clans. The Maam and Min are the closest of the clans under the Ruu, but that distance still isn't small enough to be traveled lightly. Would it still be possible for us to learn the technique, even so?"

"It would. I actually already discussed that matter with the eldest son of the Rutim, Gazraan Rutim. Even if your homes are too far, you could still exchange your men, right?"

"Exchange our men...?"

"That's right. For example, let's say the Rutim and Sauti each offer up two of their men. Your two men could learn the technique in a Rutim house, while the Rutim men who come your way could spread it as well. That way the number of men both clans have on hand wouldn't change and you could carry out your hunts like normal, while still being able to acquire the technique."

Dari Sauti's eyes opened wide, while the other clan heads started muttering among themselves.

"That... is a truly novel idea... Even if it's just for a few days, you're saying we would have utterly unrelated men stay in one another's homes?"

"Yes. It's the type of idea that could never be pulled off if the two clans didn't trust each other... But Gazraan Rutim says that now is the perfect time to rebuild such trust among the people of the forest's edge. His thinking is that the houses are too far apart, and so the bonds among unrelated clans have been growing far too weak."

"By Gazraan Rutim, you mean the Rutim clan head's son who will act as his heir, correct...?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Interesting. That clan head is like a ball of flame, but his son is able to weave arguments like that? I really would like to meet him face to face and talk with him."

Somehow, I got the feeling that Dari Sauti had a really similar air to Gazraan Rutim about him. That wasn't just

down to their large frames and honest appearances. No, they both also had personalities you wouldn't expect from anyone so young, valuing composure and logic... Those were Gazraan Rutim's strongest points, and this youth felt similar in that way.

If you added in Jiza Ruu, it would definitely make for one heck of a group. Surely Diga Suun would never be able to make a move with all of them around.

Of course, their principles and opinions were all completely different. Still, I thought it was better for such things to vary.

Jiza Ruu valued the order of the forest's edge, Gazraan Rutim was a revolutionary, while Dari Sauti seemed to be conservative yet flexible in his thinking... I felt like there was meaning to having such great men's opinions collide in order to carve out the best possible path forwards.

Or maybe I just think that way because I'm an outsider...?

I most definitely wasn't prepared to take up a leadership role, personally. I just couldn't help but feel it was best that I act merely as a springboard that they can use to find the best possible path.

However, I was a member of the Fa clan. My mistakes were the Fa clan's failings, which meant they fell on Ai Fa, too. Thanks to that, I needed to firm up my resolve to walk side by side with them. I needed to hold my head up high, and firmly insist on what I thought was the right way to go.

And anyway...

If it were Ai Fa, could she stand shoulder to shoulder with them? I couldn't help but think so as I saw her facing the Zaza and Dom clan heads straight on and asserting her opinion.

Rather than just clinging to what Gazraan Rutim had said, Ai Fa had used her own words when facing them. She had taken in Jiza Ruu's comments, and then brought to life her own thoughts and feelings. I couldn't imagine either Jiza

Ruu or Gazraan Rutim managing that.

Right, and as for those clan heads under the Suun... I thought as my gaze stealthily drifted.

The clan heads in question were drinking fruit wine on the opposite side of the room from Dan Rutim's group.

Mia Lea Ruu had said they were even more hardheaded than Donda Ruu, and somehow, their assertions seemed to overlap with what Jiza Ruu said. They were thoroughly conservative, with how they talked about valuing laws, customs, and order. Ai Fa and I must have seemed quite disagreeable from their point of view.

However, they definitely weren't our enemies. In fact, I felt that they represented one of the truly proper ways for a person of the forest's edge to be. And so, I figured we needed to satisfy them before change could truly be brought about.

So, the only disturbing element here really is the Suun clan, huh?

As I was thinking that, a new voice called out, "Clan head of the Fa." It was the Fou clan head. "Up until now, the Fou clan has cut ties with the Fa. That was because as our clan head, I had decided that it would be dangerous to be involved with you when you had bad blood with the Suun."

Ai Fa silently faced that way.

The Fou clan head had placed his right fist on the floor and was deeply bowing his head.

"I recognize here and now that that decision was mistaken... And so, I would like for our clan to form bonds with you once again."

"I don't believe that you made the wrong decision, clan head of the Fou... If you carelessly drew close to my clan, you may have had to deal with the reckless behavior of the Suun clan's foolish sons," Ai Fa stated, awkwardly placing her hand on the Fou clan head's shoulder. "And so, I believe your decision protected your family. That's nothing to feel shameful about."

“But... You even took pity on us and gave us pelts, and yet—”

“That must be some kind of mistake,” Ai Fa interjected with a pout. “I believe the women of your house have already heard this, but I didn’t give anyone pelts... But still, since you said you agree with my words, we can certainly teach you bloodletting and dissection techniques. Asuta, you said you will need a great deal of giba meat in the near future, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. I’ve got to make a massive amount of jerky before the end of the blue month, and even before that, I’ll need more meat than before to make the dishes to sell to the inn. And we can’t keep relying on just the Ruu forever, right?”

The Fou clan head looked back and between us with a sincerity in his eyes.

I gave a nod, figuring all the while that this man must be the husband or father of that Saris Ran Fou woman who once visited the Fa house.

“It will still be some time before the meat itself can be sold in the post town, but currently, I’ve been concerned about having enough to use in my cooking. So if the Fou clan will also be preparing meat, then the Fa would be happy to buy it off of you.”

That was a proposal from the Ruu clan, too. They said if all the wealth was concentrated around them, that could earn the animosity of the various small clans, so they asked that we properly share the load.

The Fou clan head remained totally silent and bowed his head again.

It had been Dari Sauti’s turn to listen, and he now gave a big yawn.

“Now then, there’s still more to discuss, but it has gotten rather late. They seem to be done drinking and reveling over there, so I suppose it’ll soon be time to get to sleep.”

I glanced over and saw that at some point Dan Rutim’s group had moved to the center of the hall, and now he was

waving a hand and calling out, "Hey! How long do you plan on chattering away? Come on over here, Asuta and Ai Fa!"

"Got it... Well then, we can discuss the details further tomorrow."

"Right. We'll have a lot to discuss on the way back. There are too many Suun-affiliated eyes keeping watch here."

With that, the other clan heads dispersed to whatever open spaces they could find.

Then, Ai Fa and I headed over towards Dan Rutim's group.

"Yeah, right over here! Sleep right next to me!" Dan Rutim called out, slapping the rug laid out across the floor.

It was the dead center of the ritual hall, and would leave us surrounded by the Ruu-affiliated clan heads.

"R-Right there? It feels like I'd have trouble relaxing, trying to sleep there."

"Why's that? If you sleep here, those Suun clan fools won't be able to lay a hand on you, no matter what they're plotting! If they try to climb over us, then I'll bite off chunks of their legs!" Dan Rutim loudly declared with a hearty laugh, then he flopped down on the floor.

Darmu Ruu and Rau Lea and everyone also started to lay down, one after another.

It really was hard to imagine a firmer defensive wall than this. The ritual hall may have been vast, but with 70 people lying down in it, there was pretty much nowhere left to step. I simply couldn't imagine it being possible to step over this carpet of flesh and make it all the way to us.

"Umm... Well then, should we go to sleep?"

"Yes," Ai Fa replied, sitting down.

During last year's clan head meeting, did Ai Fa also sleep all packed in and surrounded by men like this? The thought alone caused me to feel more than a little uneasy.

Well, I doubt anyone but the Suun clan would try anything, but still, that just sounds way too reckless.

And so, I tried to distance myself from Ai Fa as much as

possible in the narrow bit of space allotted to me. However, my consideration there didn't quite pan out. After all, as I laid there face up, Ai Fa sidled right up next to me.

"You fool. Stay close to me."

Ai Fa was right up against me, and her fingers were grabbing hold of my chest.

"U-Um, Ai Fa..."

"Quiet, you. I'm tired. We can talk tomorrow," she stated, pressing her forehead up against my right shoulder. "I really am exhausted. I feel like I talked enough for a whole year. And my head hurts a bit..."

"Right... Well, you really did give it your all tonight."

I was a bit worried that Darmu Ruu's eyes may be glaring this way, but I went ahead and gently patted Ai Fa on the head.

"Goodnight, Ai Fa. Take it easy and rest up."

"Right..."

With that, Ai Fa seemed to drift off to sleep even more smoothly than usual, and before long she started peacefully snoring away.

Jiza Ruu questioned if the Fa clan's head should be deciding the future of the forest's edge when we lack any related clans, but I don't think size has anything to do with it, I thought to myself as I looked down at her defenseless, childlike sleeping face. Plus, Ai Fa isn't the only one shouldering that burden. It's the people of the forest's edge who will decide the future of their settlement. I'm certain she's just trying to carry out her duty as one representative out of the many clan heads...

While the Suun were the leading clan, they had strayed from the norm of the forest's edge. If something could just be done about them, the future of the forest's edge was sure to open wide.

I can sort of see the direction it'll take, too. The key point will be getting the Dom and Zaza and them to abandon the Suun clan... That shouldn't be all that hard, using my

cunning and the Ruu's strength.

The clan head meeting had ended in an unbelievable dodging of the matter, but the logic was sound, so I just had to be satisfied with that.

Plus, we had managed to form bonds with the Sauti and Fou.

Now that it had come to this, the foremost problem was the matter of Mida Suun's fixation on my cooking. But we had taken countermeasures even in regards to that issue. Starting tomorrow morning, we would set to work on a method we had devised to call on Mida Suun to personally visit the Ruu settlement.

In other words, we'd be saying, "If you want to eat delicious meat, then learn the technique yourself," as well as, "If you don't like that, then just give up on eating any."

The plan was for us to raise this proposal to Zuuro Suun in front of the clan heads that fell under him.

Mida Suun was obsessed with my cooking. If he came to the post town on his own as a result, he may well cause some sort of incident. The idea was to take that threat from Yamiru Suun and turn it on its head, using it for our countermeasure instead.

It didn't especially matter if it was Mida Suun coming personally, or members of the branch families. The key point was just getting the Suun clan to learn the bloodletting and dissection techniques.

And if the folks from the Zaza and Dom and them found it unthinkable to send the Suun to the Ruu settlement all on their own, and decided to accompany them as a result, then wouldn't that be ideal?

When we brought the matter up after the dinner, Donda Ruu sat and silently thought for a while, then just said, "Do as you please."

In all likelihood, I accurately got what I was thinking across. Which is to say, the idea that we shouldn't be crossing blades with the Zaza and Dom. And that my plan

was to have the Ruu deepen their connection with them in order to weaken the Suun.

In actuality, there was no reason at all for them to be enemies. It was just that the Ruu didn't get along with the Suun, while they held trust in the leading clan. That was the one difference that caused them to clash.

It's really amusing to think that our opening here came from Mida Suun's appetite.

But in a way, that also represented the final hope for the Suun clan.

Mida Suun was like the living embodiment of the desire to eat delicious food, so if he took the initiative and started striving to hunt giba, maybe it would clear away the stagnant, gloomy air hanging about the Suun settlement at least a little.

The men hunt giba, and the women cook. In order to make a delicious meal, the whole family should work together in order to grab hold of greater prosperity... If they can reclaim the joy brought about by that, then maybe light could shine again in those eyes like rotten fish.

I mean, as long as what I'm imagining isn't completely off base, they're victims too. But anyway, if we can strip the main Suun house bare, then maybe we can tear the right to lead from them without shedding any blood, too.

It may take some time, but considering I was talking about reviving the Suun clan from decades of corruption and degeneration, of course it would require a fair bit of effort.

Well... All that'll have to wait till tomorrow...

I looked once more through the darkness at Ai Fa's adorable sleeping face, and then closed my eyes.



Just how much time had passed since then?

I was assailed by some unknown sensation and sluggishly dragged back to reality.

What is that...?

I had no idea what was going on.

But, something felt off.

There was an alarm flashing in my head.

I was only half conscious, but I could tell that something was clearly wrong.

What... was that smell? It was strangely sweet... And why was it causing an odd prickling sensation in my nose?

I slowly, sluggishly opened my heavy eyelids. However, the world around me was pitch black.

The animal fat candles must have all burnt out.

My head felt heavy, and so did my body.

It was like just one portion of my brain was awake, like I was watching a dream.

Was this that sleep paralysis thing I'd heard of?

No...

If that was the case, then how would you explain this smell? It was somehow unpleasant...

My nose, throat, and lungs all felt like they were strongly protesting the scent creeping into my body.

Was this the source of that alarm and the feeling that something was wrong?

The crazy thought of, *They couldn't be trying to kill us all with poison gas or something, right...?* suddenly sprung to mind.

Instantly, I was gripped by an overwhelming sense of unease and tried to move my body in a panic.

However, my body was unable to keep up with my thoughts.

My feelings were racing out of control, but my body couldn't move any quicker than an extra-sluggish turtle.

I could feel a bit of weight on my chest.

It was Ai Fa. Or more specifically, her fingers. I lifted my right hand up, though my senses were so dulled that it felt like it belonged to someone else, and I placed my palm atop them.

I could slowly feel the warmth of Ai Fa's body flowing my way.

She had completely fallen asleep, but she was still clinging to my chest.

I tried to call out, "Ai Fa." However, my throat was so constricted that I couldn't make the sound come out right.

Now that I noticed it, my throat felt completely parched. And for some reason, my eyes stung.

It was like someone had gone and dried out the inside of my body.

Could this be... smoke...?

Had the flame from a candle ignited this wooden structure? No, if that was the case, I should have also felt the heat of the blaze from somewhere.

And besides, someone else should have noticed the abnormality before me. I mean, I was currently surrounded by the most elite hunters of the forest's edge.

Isn't anyone else awake...?

There wasn't even a single window in the ritual hall, so my whole world was an endless expanse of inky blackness. No matter how much I strained my eyes, I couldn't see a thing.

It was then that I realized that it was nightmarishly silent.

I couldn't even hear Dan Rutim snoring.

All I could grasp with my senses were that strange sweet smell and the warmth from Ai Fa's fingers.

At any rate... Staying here is a bad idea...

I pulled out the towel I had tucked into my clothing near my chest, then used it to cover my nose and mouth. That alone was enough to help me breathe a bit easier.

I also got the feeling that the sweet smell had weakened a bit when I sat up. I still couldn't identify it, but maybe it was heavier than air, like propane.

Alright...

I reached in the darkness for Ai Fa's arms, then wrapped

my left arm around her back. With that I tried to lift her up... but then they arrived.

“What the heck? That brat’s awake, isn’t he?”

It was a young male voice dripping with malice. It was deep but sluggish, and sounded real unpleasant.

In other words, it was Diga Suun.

“Why’s he the only one awake, eh? Do melemele leaves not have much of an effect on foreigners, Tei Suun?”

“I’m not sure... I know nothing about that, either,” another voice emotionlessly responded to Diga Suun.

At the same time, an orange light started shining from behind. I slowly, steadily turned to face it.

Diga, Tei, and even Doddo Suun were all gathered there.

Diga Suun was holding a lit candle, while the other two were empty handed. That didn’t mean there were no blades dangling from their hips, though.

And all three of them had cloth wrapped around their mouths.

“Well, whatever. There shouldn’t be any issue at all with such a weak little brat being awake. We should hurry up and carry them out, though, right?” Diga Suun said with a vile chuckle, and the other two drew close.

It was impossible to resist them. I could never have beaten them in terms of raw strength to begin with, and on top of that, my whole body still felt like it was made of lead.

“Sss-... Stop...” I forced out with all my strength. However, all that produced was a voice so pathetic it sounded like it had come from a sickly old person.

Doddo Suun grabbed me while Tei Suun lifted up Ai Fa, and Ai Fa’s fingers powerlessly separated from my chest.



What was going on? What in the world was happening?
It was like some unbelievably awful nightmare, and didn't feel real in the least.

"There's no point trying to resist, you know. Everyone but you is having a nice, deep sleep," Diga Suun said with a vulgar laugh, then kicked the head of a man I wasn't familiar with lying at his feet. Despite that, the man was like a corpse, not budging in the least in response.

"You see, we bought this herb called melemele or something from a Sym sorcerer and burned it. Still, this is so much fun that I wish I had found out about it sooner."

An herb... So did it cause sleepiness like myrrh?

They had used something like that to throw these fierce hunters of the forest's edge into a deep sleep?

"Apparently, as long as you keep smelling it, you won't wake up even if your belly's being slit wide open. And I mean, it took five whole white coins just to buy this much... Still, that's a cheap price to pay to settle this long-held grudge."

Diga Suun's sluggish eyes drifted from me to Ai Fa. I reflexively lifted my fist, but Dodd Suun easily restrained me.

"Let's stop with the pointless chattering and get out of here, already. If we keep hanging around, we may end up unable to move, too."

With that, we were half dragged out of the ritual hall. As they went they kicked countless men out of their way, but sure enough, not one of them showed any signs of stirring.

This was the worst case scenario. As bad as things could get.

Seriously... Just how vile were these bastards?

It just didn't seem real in the least.

"Do you seriously... think you'll be able to get away with this?" I managed to squeeze out in a slightly more normal voice, as my breathing became a lot easier the second we were outside. However, it still didn't feel like I was even

close to managing a yell. "To do something like this, in a place where all the clan heads are gathered... Are you trying to make enemies of every last clan at the forest's edge...?"

"Shut it. A foreigner like you shouldn't go talking all high and mighty." I was being held by Doddso Suun and carried along, but now Diga Suun's grinning face was thrust right in front of me. "Plus, why should the Suun clan have to face any blame? We're in a position to be given blessings, instead."

"Blessings...?"

"Yeah, that's right. After all, the eldest son and daughter of the main house are having their weddings firmed up at the same time. What could be more auspicious?"

A chill ran up my spine. A dark, intense feeling I had never felt before squirmed in my stomach.

"Ai Fa of the Fa clan will be married to Diga Suun, while Asuta of the Fa clan will become Yamiru Suun's husband. You two are just waiting to fall to ruin, but now you get to join the Suun clan. You should be smiling instead of sobbing, you brat."

"As if... Do you really think we would ever agree to something like that?"

Diga Suun pulled back as if from shock. But then, he broke out in a repulsive smile.

"E-Even if you make a face like that, there's nothing left you can do! If you refuse, then we'll throw the both of you down into the bottom of the valley! If we do that, the other clan heads will all think you abandoned the forest's edge and ran off to some town, or something!"

"Stop yelling, Diga. The Ruu clan head was sleeping in a vacant house instead of the ritual hall," Doddso Suun chimed in, his breath reeking of booze. Hearing that, Diga Suun's large frame twitched and shrunk again.

"D-Don't scare me like that, Doddso. Hey, you led the Ruu group to the southernmost house, didn't you, Tei Suun?"

"Yes, just as you requested."

"In that case, there's nothing to worry about. Even if I go shouting as loud as I can, they won't be able to hear it from that far away... And so you better give up already. The only choices left to you are becoming Yamiru's husband or getting eaten by the mundt."

Then, Diga Suun turned Tei Suun's way. Tei Suun, who was holding the completely unconscious Ai Fa.

"Carry Ai Fa back to my house. She still shouldn't wake up for a while, but go ahead and bind her arms and legs tight anyway. I'll be on over soon after talking to Yamiru."

"Right," Tei Suun replied, then turned to leave.

"Stop," I called out to his back. "If you do anything to Ai Fa... I'll make sure you all pay."

Diga Suun shrunk back again. The thin smile remained, but his face was clearly growing pale.

Tei Suun remained perfectly expressionless, though.

"You can't even stand on your own two feet, so what exactly are you planning on doing to make us pay?" Doddo Suun questioned, and a sharp pain ran along my scalp. Doddo Suun was still holding me, but he had grabbed my hair with all his might. "I'm begging you, don't go saying you'll actually marry Yamiru, you damn foreigner. I've got no intention of welcoming you as one of us. I just want to chop off both your legs so you can't run away and then throw you into a nest of mundt."

"...Go ahead and try if you think you can manage it."

I glared into Doddo Suun's eyes, like those of a starving stray dog, from up close and personal.

He trembled at first, but then he seemed to get ashamed at his own cowardice and bared his yellow teeth.

"Oh, I'll do it alright. I'm looking forward to seeing how long that look in your eyes will last... Let's go, Diga. And you hurry up and get moving too, Tei Suun."

"Right."

With that, Ai Fa disappeared into the darkness.

I gritted my teeth so firmly it felt like they would crack

while taking continuous big breaths. As the fresh oxygen entered my system, I could feel the strength returning to my limbs. I had actually recovered more than halfway while being held in Doddo Suun's arms.

However, it wasn't time yet. I still wasn't strong enough to shake free of them and get away.

I just had to wait for a bit more of my strength to return, then run as fast as I could as soon as I saw an opening.

I couldn't let them do anything to Ai Fa, no matter what.

They said Donda Ruu was in the southernmost vacant house, right?

They really were pathetic to have let that information slip so lightly.

I had become the treacherous Suun clan's prisoner, and I could feel the flames of rage burning hot in my belly.

Chapter 3: Night of Ruin

1

“Yamiru, we’ve brought your husband-to-be,” Diga Suun stated in a low voice while knocking on the house’s door.

The house was rather far on the outskirts of the Suun settlement. I couldn’t tell the precise location as I only had the light from Diga Suun’s candle to go on, but considering the path we took from the ritual hall, it was at the northern extreme and to the west.

I was getting further and further from the far south where Donda Ruu was sleeping, but my body still hadn’t recovered. A good bit of strength had returned to my arms and legs, but my sense of balance remained shaky. I didn’t feel like I could even run in a straight line like this, and besides, Doddo Suun had a firm grip on the nape of my neck and my right arm.

I felt like my heart was collapsing in on itself when I thought of Ai Fa, but I absolutely couldn’t afford to be impatient. If I screwed up now, I could easily end up leading us down the path to ruin.

“Yeah... Yeah, that’s right... It’s fine. It went well...” Diga Suun whispered through the shut door.

Soon enough, his eyes turned back our way.

“Alright, time to meet your fiancée... Go ahead and let her dote on you plenty, you brat.”

I was dragged by Doddo Suun and made to stand in front of the door.

Were they intending on leaving me alone with Yamiru Suun? In that case, maybe I would have a chance.

Yamiru Suun kept a slender dagger hanging from her

waist, so if I could steal that and take her hostage... It was a rather violent plan for me, but I had to try to see it through.

As I firmed up my resolve, Diga Suun pulled open the door, and Doddo Suun mercilessly thrust me on through.

When I tumbled into the room, the door shut behind me. And in that moment, I almost screamed.

"I've been awaiting you, Asuta... My apologies for being so rough about all this..." Yamiru Suun's voice sounded out through the darkness.

However, I remained pressed against the cold wooden floor, unable to respond.

Blood... The smell of blood permeated the whole house.

That repulsive stench was almost physically overpowering as it pierced my nose.

Smell came from particles. And so, those little bits floating in the air were stabbing at the mucus membrane of my nose, which I perceived as this stench.

The smell was so dense that it felt like there was putrid blood pouring down the back of my nose. Absolutely disgusting.

I could feel a gag clearly rising in my throat.

"What's the matter...? Are you angry because you were dragged away from that woman you care so much about?"

Those words drove a wedge into my consciousness, which had been on the verge of drifting away.

There was no time for me to be slumping against the floor. I still needed to rescue Ai Fa.

And so, I slowly lifted my gaze.

Bloody legs came into view...

Then a bloody waist...

Bloody stomach...

Bloody arms...

Bloody chest...

Bloody neck...

Bloody face.

Yamiru Suun was standing there without so much as a

single thread of clothing on her body, completely soaked in blood.

“Wha...” I let slip in a hoarse voice. “What in the world were you doing...?”

“Hehehe... What do you mean? I was just partaking in the blessings of the forest...”

A smile shone from behind her long, blood-soaked hair.

Her face was coated in blood, but she was smiling.

Even her normally chilly dark blue eyes had a wet-looking shine to them.

“What we need is power. Giba meat alone isn’t even close to enough... And so, I was letting the strength of the forest wash over my entire body...”

“So that’s giba blood...?”

My eyes were steadily growing adjusted. The room was in fact lit by a candle, though only just barely. And thanks to that... I was able to see something that I really didn’t want to.

There was the black silhouette of an animal dangling behind Yamiru Suun.

It was a massive giba corpse, hung from a ceiling beam with chains. Was that the one Mida Suun had mentioned earlier today?

“Our ancestors welcomed the forest’s strength into their bodies in this way. That’s how they were able to gain the strength needed to hunt vicious giba...”

Yamiru Suun started walking towards me, and an eerie splishing sound filled the air. The floor was also drenched in giba blood.

In all likelihood, she had slit the giba’s throat and let the blood rain down over her.

The darkness was illuminated dimly by orange flame, and a naked woman stood in front of me, coated in dark red blood... The sight was like something out of a nightmare, causing me to tremble, and yet I still yelled out, “What do you think you’re doing?! Eating raw giba is forbidden here at

the forest's edge, right? But giba blood is every bit as dangerous! When it's not properly heated first, it can be poison to human beings!"

"That doesn't matter... This is an essential ritual..."

"I've never heard of such a thing! And even if it was done way in the past, I'm sure it was forbidden because of the danger! You need to hurry up and wash that off right away!"

Yamiru stared at me, her eyes looking like she was in a trance.

"Are you telling the Suun clan to fall to ruin? The Suun clan needs strength... And so, won't you give us yours, too...?"

Yamiru Suun drew closer with a *splish, splish*.

My whole body quaked with an emotion somewhere between rage and terror, and yet I still stood up and faced Yamiru Suun.

"I just don't get you! Why... Why is it just the Suun clan that's like this? The rest of the people of the forest's edge are so honest and proud... So how did the leading clan alone end up like this?!"

"I believe... That's surely because the Suun clan took on all of the poison ourselves..." There was some strange shine in Yamiru Suun's eyes, like she was just barely holding onto her sanity. "By the Suun clan falling deeper and deeper into darkness, the rest of our people who know nothing of that are able to live even more pure and brilliant lives... I'm certain that the Suun have protected the people of the forest's edge in that way..."

"I don't get it! Why can't you all just live proudly and honestly like everyone else?!"

"That's just not possible..." Yamiru Suun replied, a different light now gleaming in her eyes. "We can no longer turn back... The day of ruin is drawing ever closer... It's not possible to keep deceiving the clans under us..."

"Deceiving them...?"

"You've already realized, haven't you? Or are you dim-

witted enough to not have noticed, even after manning the Suun clan stove...?"

Suddenly, I was at a loss for words.

In that case... That was it after all, huh? I guess my suspicions had hit the mark.

"I've had enough... If we're already facing ruin, then I figured I may as well cling to one final hope... If you're with us, the Suun clan can be saved. You can earn so many coins in a day that with you, the Suun clan wouldn't have to be destroyed..."

"That... That doesn't make any sense! You would be fine even without relying on me just by hunting giba like normal, right?! Then you could live ordinary lives! That's how everyone else lives, so I don't understand why you can't!"

"If I were the head of the Suun clan, perhaps I would have chosen that path..." Yamiru Suun's lips were raised in the shape of a half-moon. And yet, her face made it look as if she was crying, with dark red blood for tears. "But that doesn't matter now... The previous clan head Zattsu was a fool, and the current clan head Zuuro is even more of one... My brother Diga is next in line, and he's the greatest fool of all... There's no hope of salvation left within the Suun clan..."

"But...!"

"You're the only one left who can save us."

Yamiru Suun came up right next to me. Between the unbearable stench of blood and the smile twisted through an almost palpable despair, I could feel my heart freeze over.

"Will you become my husband and save the Suun clan...? Or if you can't stand the idea, fall to ruin alongside us...?"

Her bloody fingers slowly reached out.

Just before they touched my cheek, I replied, "I refuse," with a shake of my head. "I won't accept either of those options. If you all want to be saved, then I'll lend you my power as a member of the Fa clan. But I can't join the Suun."

"I see..." Yamiru Suun's fingers slipped past me and hit

the door. "So you won't save us..."

"No, I'm telling you, if you really are hoping to be saved, then there are better ways to—"

"How unfortunate."

Yamiru Suun loudly wrenched the door open. In that same instant, the nape of my neck was grabbed from behind and I was pulled to the ground.

"How truly unfortunate..."

Yamiru Suun was now disappearing behind the door. The last thing I saw was her bloody face making an expression like that of a small, crying child.

"I've been waiting for this. So you chose to become mundt feed like I hoped, huh?" Doddo Suun questioned, his voice cracking with mad joy.

I hurriedly rose to my feet. However, I staggered and ended up having to place my hand against the door. Apparently, I was still feeling a bit of the effect of the melemele leaves.

"If that's the path you've chosen, then that hunter woman will be sharing your fate. Once Diga's done with her, we'll throw you down into the valley together."

My gaze raced about in shock.

It wasn't Diga Suun standing next to Doddo Suun and holding a candle, but rather Tei Suun.

"Where did Diga Suun go...?!" I yelled, my rage unconsciously boiling up.

Doddo Suun's face twisted into a smile that reminded me of a lion-dog statue.

"He should be right in the middle of having some fun by now. I don't know what's so good about a woman with beastly eyes like her, though."

"You bastards..." My vision was going deep red with rage. My body felt like it was about to explode. "Just how completely rotten can you be...?" Those words slipped out of my mouth without me even thinking.

The smile disappeared from Doddo Suun's face and he

reached for the blade at his hip.

“What’s with those eyes...? Do you want me to cut you down here and now?”

“Go ahead and do it already if you’ve got the guts!”

I removed my hand from the door.

My heart was pounding in my chest like an alarm.

The veins across my head felt like they were about to burst.

This... This was the first time I felt this strong of a hatred for someone.

If Diga Suun really had laid a hand on Ai Fa... I had no idea how far I may go.

“Move... Get out of my way!”

Doddo Suun shrunk away.

Then, his hand gripped his sword’s handle, and he drew it from its leather sheath. But not a heartbeat later, a shadow came bolting out of the darkness.

I had no idea what was going on.

However, I did see Doddo Suun fly several meters through the air and then tumble across the ground, and Tei Suun grab hold of his still-sheathed blade.

“Stop right there. If I’m up against you, then I won’t be able to hold back.”

It was the familiar voice of a young man.

He was smaller than me, and gripping a long pole as he faced off with Tei Suun.

“I’d prefer it if nobody ended up dead. My dad gave me a pretty strict warning about that.”

“L-Ludo Ruu?!”

Even only seeing him from behind, there was no mistaking him.

The yellowish-brown haired youth shrugged his shoulders a bit while still holding the grigee pole at the ready.

“Sorry, Asuta. I was told I couldn’t lend a hand no matter what until the Suun clan broke a big enough taboo that they couldn’t just talk their way out of it. I was finally able to

come out of hiding thanks to that idiot drawing his blade.”

“Why... Why are you here, Ludo Ruu?”

“It was my dad’s orders. He told me to stay up through the night and keep an eye on the Suun settlement. I probably would’ve died of boredom if they hadn’t done anything.”

“Ludo Ruu, you should save the idle chatter for later,” another shadow chimed in, appearing from behind Tei Suun.

He was about as small and skinny as Ludo Ruu, but had blackish-brown hair... It was Shin Ruu, the young head of one of the branch families.

“Man of the Suun, stop it with the pointless resistance. You won’t be able to drive the two of us away on your own,” Shin Ruu stated, also brandishing a long pole. It was probably grigee, too. They both had blades hanging from their hips, but they made no signs of drawing them.



“W-What are you doing, Tei Suun?! Hurry up and slaughter them!” Doddo Suun wailed in confusion from down on the ground.

Tei Suun’s emotionless eyes glanced over that way.

“Is that an order as a member of the main house, Doddo Suun?”

“Just shut up and do it!”

Tei Suun gently placed the candlestick at his feet.

When he grabbed his blade’s sheath, Ludo Ruu raised his voice and said, “Hey! Cut it out. You seem like you’re crazy strong, so I’m not confident we could make it through without killing you, even with the two of us.”

“Then go ahead and kill me...”

With his gaze still looking muddy, Tei Suun pointed his drawn blade towards their eyes.

“Tch. My dad’s going to be so mad about this,” Ludo Ruu muttered, not sounding worried in the least.

The boy tossed aside his grigee pole and grabbed the hatchet hanging from his waist. It was that tough-looking one that he had bought in the post town.

However, he left it in its leather sheath as it dangled in his right hand.

“You idiots... You will all be mundt food!” Doddo Suun loudly wailed, charging toward Ludo Ruu with his sword.

Tei Suun brandished his blade at the same time.

This looked bad, and I half-subconsciously took a step forward. Then, with all my might, I rammed into Doddo Suun’s back with a shoulder tackle.

It probably wouldn’t have even wobbled a normal man in the least. However, Doddo Suun was drunk. Plus, it seemed like he may have taken a good bit of damage from Ludo Ruu’s blow.

At any rate, my tackle managed to throw off Doddo Suun’s balance and send the two of us tumbling to the ground in a tangle.

“Damn it!” Doddo Suun cursed as he tried to get back

up.

Seeing that, I bit into the back of the hand holding Doddo Suun's sword as hard as I could.

"Gyagh!" he yelped, kicking me in the stomach. That blow landed hard and made me tumble backwards.

"Dammit! I'll kill you! You're dead, you damn foreigner!"

Doddo Suun leapt to his feet, cradling his bleeding right hand.

And suddenly, a towering shadow rose up behind him.

"What do you think you're doing...?" a deep voice questioned, trembling with rage.

Doddo Suun turned around, looking aghast.

In that instant, a massive palm smashed into his face and sent him flying.

That put an end to things.

Doddo Suun flew multiple times further through the air than before, rolled along the ground, and then finally came to a stop upon crashing into the wall of Yamiru Suun's house.

"Asuta! Are you alright?!"

That shadow rushed over and grabbed me far more nimbly than you would expect from its massive size.

The candle giving off light was far away, but there was no mistaking such a unique silhouette. That man who picked me up gently and had such a panicked look on his face that it seemed like he was about to cry was, of course, Dan Rutim.

"Dan Rutim... Why are you here, too...?" I squeezed out while cradling my aching stomach. Well, at least Dan Rutim looked relieved.

"That's my line! I heard some sort of commotion going on and came to check it out, and then... Seriously, don't worry me like that, Asuta! What in the world are you doing in a place like this?"

"Ah, no... Help Ludo and Shin Ruu first..."

"Hmm?" Dan Rutim questioned and looked around. His face shifted back to that of a raging genie. "So there was

one more idiot left, huh?! Man of the Suun clan, if you're going to point your blade towards members of the Ruu clan, then I'll take you on!"

It had only been a short while, but who knows how much fierce fighting had occurred in the meantime. Ludo Ruu and Tei Suun were both bleeding from their heads, while Shin Ruu's grigee pole had been broken and he was now down on his knees and clutching his chest.

"Clan head of the Rutim... I received no order to kill you," Tei Suun stated, lowering his sword. Then, his eyes like rotten fish listlessly turned towards Ludo Ruu. "However, you should not come any closer. If you do, I'll have to cut you down."

"What the heck? I just don't get you, old-timer." Ludo Ruu wiped away the blood dripping down onto his face with the back of his hand, and then stepped back just a bit. "Dan Rutim! You do something about this, then! At this rate, I'll end up having to draw my blade, too!"

"Hmmm?" Dan Rutim replied, then practically pulled me along as he approached Ludo Ruu. After entrusting me to the youth, he stood to face Tei Suun. "Just what are you going to do, then? If you feel like sheathing your blade, then hurry up and do it."

"I am unable to do such a thing of my own will. I was ordered to cut down these two youths."

"I see," Dan Rutim answered, then he kicked Tei Suun in the stomach.

Tei Suun dropped his sword, and silently collapsed to the ground.

"I really don't get you. Aren't there any normal folks in the Suun clan?" Dan Rutim muttered with a sour expression.

After shooting a glance his way, I turned and grabbed Ludo Ruu.

"Ludo Ruu! What about Ai Fa?! Was there someone else who went after her?!"

"Huh? No, it was just me and Shin Ruu on watch. There

wasn't anyone left to handle Ai Fa."

"What?! Why?!"

"I mean, you seemed like you were in more danger. And we couldn't draw our blades, so it'd be pretty rough taking on the two of them alone," Ludo Ruu responded with a pout.

"I see. Sorry. I really am grateful that you saved me... But now, could you help me look for Ai Fa?!"

"What's all this fuss about? Did something happen to Ai Fa?" Dan Rutim chimed in.

"Ai Fa got taken to Diga Suun's house! If we don't find her quickly, then...!"

The pain in my heart was far greater than that of my kicked stomach. I felt so shaken that it was almost like I was about to stop breathing.

Ludo Ruu stared at my panicked face from the side.

"Ai Fa will be just fine, right? Even if she was kind of sleepy, there's no way that eldest son of the Suun could get the better of her."

"No, but those Suun bastards burned some sort of strange herb and put everyone in the ritual hall deep asleep. As long as that's still acting on her, she's in danger!"

Even the time I was using to explain that was precious. However, Ludo Ruu still looked confused.

"Ah, it looked like they were doing something while creeping around with their candlestick. So that was it, huh? But you and Dan Rutim are doing just fine, right? So Ai Fa should be alright, too."

"Hmm... I noticed a strange smell while I was asleep and crawled out of the ritual hall in a hurry. I must have crushed a good number of folks along the way, but nobody seemed to wake up."

So Dan Rutim escaped thanks to his excellent sense of smell too, huh?

That certainly was lucky, but still... For now, Ai Fa came first.

"Please, help me out! She must be somewhere here in

the settlement!”

“Hmm. In that case, I guess we should just go around smashing down each and every door...” Dan Rutim started to say, but then his eyes suddenly caught sight of something.

“Who’s there?!”

A far off voice feebly yelped out an “Eek!”

“Stop! You’re not getting away!”

Dan Rutim suddenly disappeared. With a grunt, he took off running in the opposite direction of Yamiru Suun’s house. He really was shockingly quick. He had to weigh over 100 kilos considering his build, yet his form was beautiful enough to be fitting of a first-rate sprinter.

That reliable yet humorous sight disappeared into the darkness, and before long, a shriek of “Gyah!” rang out. “Let me go! I didn’t do anything! I just thought it was noisy, so I came to look!”

It was a shrill, hysterical voice from a young girl. In other words, it had come from the youngest daughter of the main Suun house, Tsuvai Suun.

Her tiny body soon came into view, held under Dan Rutim’s massive arm.

“Tsuvai Suun! Where is Diga Suun’s house?!”

Tsuvai Suun shot me an annoyed-looking glare. Then, she glanced over at the motionless Doddo and Tei Suun.

“I don’t really get what’s going on... But the Suun clan may just be done for, huh?”

“Hey, Tsuvai Suun...!”

“Don’t glare at me with those scary eyes. I really had nothing to do with it,” Tsuvai Suun replied, breaking out in a pout. “Diga’s house is on the other side of the main house, right nearby.”

“Alright! Let’s get going, Asuta!”

Dan Rutim took off running, still holding onto Tsuvai Suun. After picking up the candle by my feet, I followed after him as quick as I could.

“Shin Ruu! You tie these guys up! And don’t let the

woman in that house escape, alright?” Ludo Ruu called out, then came up beside us. “It’ll be alright, Asuta. Ai Fa is a hunter. Those fools of the Suun clan have forgotten their pride as hunters, so there’s no way any of them could get the better of her.”

Just how much happier would I feel if I could truly believe his words?

Ai Fa... I’m begging you, please be okay...!

This was probably the first time in my life I had ever faced such deep, overwhelming despair. It wasn’t this bad even back when I leapt into the flames back in my old world.

My heart was aching.

My knees felt like they would give out on me.

Ai Fa...

I don’t care if it’s a god or a devil who does it, but please protect Ai Fa.

That was a once-in-a-lifetime request.

It doesn’t matter one bit how I end up. Without Ai Fa, I couldn’t go on.

If something really bad happens to her, I don’t know what I’m gonna do.

“That’s the house.”

A wooden house identical to the others around it came into view out of the darkness.

Dan Rutim was at the lead, running straight to the door and kicking it, giving off a dull thud.

“Hmph! That’s a tough one!”

Dan Rutim thrust his leg out again, and this time both the door and bolt went flying.

“Ai Fa!”

I slipped past Dan Rutim’s large frame and flew inside. There wasn’t anyone in the main hall. However, one of the doors along the inner wall was half open, and a bit of light was leaking out.

“Hey! Don’t go recklessly rushing ahead!” Ludo Ruu yelled out from behind, but I took off running even so.

I threw open the door, stepped inside... and tumbled.

“Wah!”

There was something lying limply sideways right inside the room. I had caught my foot on it and taken a fall.

The candle I was holding also hit the floor and started to scorch the fur rug.

“Ai Fa...!”

Ai Fa was there. Both her arms and legs were bound, and her body was curled up like a fetus.

She was atop bedding spread out farther into the room, lying listlessly on her side.

“Ai Fa...”

I reached out for her shoulder.

Suddenly, her hands lashed out and hit my chest with an incredible amount of force, despite being bound by a leather strap. An inferno full of rage was blazing in her blue eyes, but it instantly subsided.

“Asuta... You’re okay...?”

“Wah!”

She pulled incredibly hard at my chest, causing me to fall on top of her. Her smooth cheek rubbed up against mine.



"I was so worried... I'm just glad you're alright..."

"That's my line..."

I breathed a sigh of relief that I felt with all my heart.

In the end, I had been saved. I didn't lose Ai Fa, didn't come to hate this world, and didn't have to curse myself for being so careless.

I didn't end up losing my heart and soul.

While sending my thanks to every last deity that may exist in this world, I hugged Ai Fa tight.

"See, she's totally fine, right?" Ludo Ruu proudly gloated as he approached. "This is the eldest son of the Suun, yeah? He sure looks good and knocked out."

I turned and looked that way while lowering Ai Fa back onto the bedding.

Sure enough, it was Diga Suun that I had tripped over. That despicable eldest Suun son was sprawled out on his back by the entrance to the room.

"You did that, right, Ai Fa? It sure is impressive that you fought back with your arms and legs bound, though."

"As if the Suun clan would ever get the better of me, regardless of what disadvantages I may have... I slammed my elbow into his face and then kicked him till he went down..." Ai Fa muttered, still seeming half out of it. This time, she pressed her forehead up against my cheek.

Just as I started to feel a bit embarrassed, I caught a whiff of a very familiar sweet smell.

It was the aroma of fruit wine. And it was quite clearly hanging around Ai Fa.

"Don't move, alright, Ai Fa?" Ludo Ruu said, drawing the knife from his waist and then slicing through Ai Fa's bindings.

The instant her arms were free, she flung them around my neck.

"Thank goodness... I'm so very, very glad you're alright, Asuta..."

"R-Right, me too... Are you alright, though, Ai Fa? You still

seem a bit out of it.”

Ludo Ruu and Dan Rutim, who was still standing in the door to the room, stared at us with clear confusion on their faces. Ai Fa didn't notice at all, but she soon finally brought her face away from mine and asked, “What do you mean?” with a tilt of her head.

Her eyes were droopy enough at the moment to remind me of Vina Ruu. And her slightly pouting pink lips looked incredibly sexy. On top of that, I noticed her cheeks looked ever so slightly flushed.

“Were you forced to drink wine or something...?”

“Hmm? Now that you mention it, I get the feeling something was poured into my mouth while I was sleeping... And then, I woke up...”

“I see. And then as soon as you were up, you beat down Diga Suun.”

It must have been that Ai Fa was still asleep, so he had her drink some wine to rouse her. But fittingly for what a fool he was, that resulted in his defeat.

Or at least that's what I thought, but Ai Fa replied, “No...” with a shake of her head. “It was later that the eldest son of the Suun arrived... That fool showed up as I was in a daze after having been given something to drink and awakening... wondering what I was doing in such a place with my limbs bound...” Ai Fa clung to my neck again. “At any rate, I'm just glad you're alright... I told you never to leave my side, didn't I...?”

“Y-Yeah, sorry. But yeah, it's just good that we're both fine.”

As I experienced this unusual sort of closeness with Ai Fa, I swiftly glanced around my surroundings.

Sure enough, there wasn't a fruit wine container lying anywhere. That meant some third party other than Diga Suun had saved Ai Fa from danger.

Could it have been Kamyua Yoshu?

That guy's aloof face was the first thing that came to

mind.

However, that didn't feel quite right, somehow. I mean, would he seriously do such a halfhearted job? No, I got the feeling that if he was saving her he would go all the way and at least unbind her limbs. But fortunately, Ai Fa's hands were bound in front of her, allowing her to properly defend herself. Still, considering whoever had done it hadn't even waited to make sure Ai Fa was awake, they had pretty much left it up to fate... yet they hadn't just stayed as a mere spectator.

Then could it have been...

Tei Suun...?

He was the one who was supposed to have bound Ai Fa. So if someone bound her hands in front and granted her more movement, it would have to be him.

He had said he couldn't defy the main house, and yet that man with his listless eyes dropped his blade in no time at all when faced with Dan Rutim...

Did he leave Ai Fa with a chance of resisting...?

"Well then, shall we get going, Asuta?" Dan Rutim called out while stroking his dark brown beard.

"Get going...? Where to?"

"To Donda Ruu, of course. And then after that, I'd assume to the leader of our people," he replied with a big grin. "Look at how many taboos they've gone and broken in just a single night. No matter how much our dear leader bows his head, he won't be able to wipe away these fools' crimes. This may even be the final day for the Suun clan."

"That may be so..."

The Suun clan had taken a big risk, fighting with their backs against the wall, and they had lost.

However... why had they gone with such a foolish gamble, and on this day of all the ones they could have chosen? Why had they been so reckless in trying to capture me and Ai Fa? It had just taken a bit of an open seam to peck at to bring the whole thing down, so why go with such

a rash plan?

And in the first place, just whose idea had it been to begin with?

Had Zuuro Suun ordered it? Or was it just Diga and Doddo Suun running wild on their own?

There was way too much that I didn't know.

But at any rate, things absolutely needed to be settled.

"...Let's go," I stated, and moved to stand. However, Ai Fa wasn't letting go of me. "Hey, Ai Fa, we're going. Can you walk on your own?"

"Hmm? No, don't leave my side..." she replied, her smooth arms hugging me even tighter.

Ludo Ruu and Dan Rutim's eyes went wide.

"No, um, you've got it all wrong. I think she's just a bit drunk because she was made to drink fruit wine after also inhaling the smoke from that strange herb," I hurriedly tried to explain, but their expressions didn't shift in the least.

Then, Dan Rutim turned towards Ludo Ruu.

"Ludo Ruu, I have a proposal..."

"Hmm? What is it, all of a sudden?"

"The Fa clan doesn't fall under the Ruu, but they are friends to the Rutim. When Asuta and Ai Fa get married, can we borrow the Ruu's plaza for the banquet and all come celebrate?"

"Yeah, I don't see why not. Just make it so that only those who want to celebrate have to come."

"No, seriously, you've got it all wrong!" I yelled out, despite getting the feeling that it wasn't convincing in the least.

As I wailed, the thought of, *But will we really be able to bring this all to a close?* vaguely came to mind.

It all just felt way too sudden.

Would all of our planning and brainstorming from before turn out to be for nothing, as the Suun cut off the path to mutual understanding and destroyed themselves?

A number of ominous statements swirled through my

head.

"Or if you can't stand the idea, fall to ruin alongside us...?" Yamiru Suun had said.

"Then go ahead and kill me..." Tei Suun had stated.

Could it be... Did a portion of those within the Suun clan wish for its destruction more strongly than anyone?

2

"Hey, wake up, my comrades!" Dan Rutim loudly proclaimed while splashing the contents of a water jug around the ritual hall.

Several of the men came to and shot to their feet, yelling out.

"What do you think you're doing?! Have you gone mad?!" one particularly furious man shouted as he rose. However, he then staggered and fell back to his knees. "Hmm? What's going on...? My limbs have no strength in them..."

"Right? That's why I dashed the water over you all," Dan Rutim chimed in with a hearty laugh.

All the while, astonishment and angry bellows kept sounding throughout the ritual hall. Donda Ruu and the women were standing in the four entrances to the hall, carrying out the same cruel act as Dan Rutim.

It had been some time since me and Ai Fa were kidnapped, so the smoke from the melemele leaves had surely thinned out a good bit. The men actually came to their senses and crept out of the hall a lot quicker than I had expected.

"If you're awake, then get out of the ritual hall! There's smoke from a poisonous foreign herb hanging around in there! And those of you who have the strength, lend a hand to anyone who's still asleep!"

Ai Fa and I watched as Dan Rutim worked away, looking

like he was truly enjoying himself.

Ai Fa seemed to be about 80% back to normal, but she was still shaky on her feet, so I was lending her my shoulder.

“Clan head of the Rutim! What in the world are you up to?!” questioned the Zaza clan head as he came out of the ritual hall and grabbed Dan Rutim.

“Don’t ask me! Ask your beloved Suun clan!” Dan Rutim replied with a dauntless smile, pointing down by our feet. Diga Suun was seated there sulking, his hands tied behind his back with a leather strap. “These bastards used a strange foreign herb to put us to sleep, plotting to do the members of the Fa clan harm! All you who fall under the Suun should share in their shame!”

“What? Is that true, eldest son of the Suun...?!” the Zaza clan head asked, his eyes like those of a wild beast as he glared at Diga Suun.

Diga Suun’s shoulders quaked a bit, and he silently looked away.

“We’re going to go force Zuuro Suun to explain whether or not the whole of the Suun clan was behind their vile deeds! All of you clan heads should accompany us and hear what is said!”

The Zaza clan head’s shoulders were trembling.

It was then that Rau Lea showed up, his golden-brown hair all dripping wet.

“Dan Rutim! What in the world is all this commotion about?! What did the Suun clan do?”

“Ah, clan head of the Lea, the Suun clan has finally gone and shown their true nature! Depending on how things go we may end up swinging our blades, so you better get good and awake!” Dan Rutim said, then offered a long sword by his feet to Rau Lea. It had come from Diga Suun, as all the men’s blades were still entrusted to the Suun clan.

“This is insane! Do you seriously intend to take up arms against our leading clan?!” the Zaza clan head suddenly shouted out, his voice full of rage.

Dan Rutim turned to face him, not looking worried in the least.

“Even if they belong to the leading clan, if they broke our laws they must be punished. Otherwise, the order of the forest’s edge would collapse... You should open your eyes already too, clan head of the Zaza.”

“But... But why should the Suun clan need to do harm to the Fa?! There’s no reason for them to do such a thing!”

“Like I said, we’re going to go ask about that. So save your anger for after we hear what our dear leader has to say, alright?”

While all that was going on, it seemed most everyone sleeping in the ritual hall had been evacuated. Around half of them were in a sleepy haze, but the other half had listened to Dan Rutim’s words and now had the burning glare of hunters in their eyes.

“Looks like this is everyone...” Donda Ruu’s voice called out, drawing closer through the darkness. His eyes were blazing like a wild beast, too.

“Ooh, Donda Ruu. What happened with the second son and the rest of them?”

“I left Ludo and a number of them in charge of that. We’ll meet up in front of the main house.”

“I see. Well then, shall we get going too?”

Dan Rutim’s thick fingers grabbed hold of the nape of Diga Suun’s neck.

“Damn it! Let go of me! You really think you’ll get away with doing something like this to the clan that leads our people?! And hey, Zaza and Jeen, what are you just standing around spacing out for?! Do something about these insolent fools already!”

“Don’t make such a fuss, eldest son of the Suun. Just who here do you think is the angriest of all?” Dan Rutim stated, half chuckling and half sounding simply astounded. “If you can’t even understand that much, then you’ll end up getting strangled to death by your allies before anyone else, you

know.”

“Gah...!” Diga Suun cowered, curling up.

Had he finally noticed the looks on the faces of the Zaza and Jeen clan heads? I mean, it was pretty darn clear to me that they were the most worked up of anyone here.

Donda Ruu, Dan Rutim, and their group were all fired up and excited to finally be getting their showdown. But for the clans under the Suun, they had their respect for the leading clan tarnished and must have felt a horrible burning anger in their guts.

“Alright... Rise up, leaders of our numerous clans! As the clan head of the Ruu, I, Donda Ruu, will demand the Suun clan head explain the truth behind this trampling upon the bonds and trust of all of us here at the forest’s edge! Let us determine with our eyes and ears if the Suun clan is truly qualified to lead our people!” Donda Ruu roared, his voice sounding out through the darkness.

Hearing that, even the men who had been lying on the ground staggered to their feet.

Now, the eyes of hunters shone all around.

“Can you walk, Ai Fa...?” I asked, only for her to give a really dissatisfied pout.

“I can manage... But you and Dan Rutim are completely back to normal, so why am I the only one left in such a state?”

Apparently she could walk on her own, but she still clung firmly to my shoulder.

“I’m sure that’s because you were made to drink fruit wine or whatever. It may have been effective at waking you up, but normally sleeping medicine and alcohol are about the worst combination imaginable.”

“Ugh, how unsightly...” Ai Fa muttered angrily while rubbing her head up against me.

It was then that the tall silhouette of Darmu Ruu approached. He must not have fully recovered yet either, as he was leaning on the shoulder of the second son of the

Rutim.

“What is it? Did you come to laugh at me again for how pathetic I look? You’re not much different than me today, though...” Ai Fa must have been in quite a poor mood to be the one to suddenly go and pick a fight.

Darmu Ruu, meanwhile, just had a dangerous glare shining in his eyes. And maybe I was just imagining things, but the scar on his right cheek looked redder than usual, as if to show his anger or regret or something.

“It seems that those who drank a great deal of fruit wine are recovering slower. I didn’t have a drop to drink, so perhaps that’s why I shot right up as soon as the water hit me,” the second son of the Rutim chimed in. His face reminded me a lot of Gazraan Rutim’s, but he was just a bit plumper, like his father. “Well then, let’s get going. I don’t know how things will end up, but I’d have to imagine this night will have a huge effect on the fate of the Suun clan.”

And so, we ended up walking to the main Suun house as one big group.

Donda Ruu was in the lead, followed by Dan Rutim dragging along Diga Suun, while Rau Lea and the others who fell under the Ruu firmly clustered around to the left and the right. A step behind them were the clan heads of the Dom and Zaza. The rest of the group surrounding them must have all fallen under the Suun also. And the Sauti and other smaller clans of course accompanied us, too.

Anger and distrust burned brightly in everyone’s eyes.

Had the Suun clan really gone and trampled their bonds into the dirt? Why would they do something so barbaric? Or was this all a farce made up by the Fa and the Ruu?

Surely, everyone had different such thoughts swirling around inside.

But at the very least, every last one of them was furious.

There was no way such hunters could accept the humiliation of having been forced to fall asleep due to some strange foreign herb. And above even that was the fact that

they had gone and threatened the very lives of those who had done nothing wrong.

“Hey there. You’re pretty late, Dad.”

Ludo Ruu’s group had been standing there waiting for us in front of the main house.

That included Ludo and Shin Ruu, as well as Doddo and Tei Suun, whose limbs were bound with leather straps. And also, Yamiru Suun. She was clothed in the same outfit she wore earlier in the day, but her hair was now sopping wet. She must have washed off, but even at this distance I could still smell a faint metallic scent hanging about her.

Yamiru Suun wasn’t bound, but she was thoroughly surrounded by Mia Lea Ruu and the other women. There wasn’t even the slightest hint of an emotion on her face.

“Listen up, clan heads!” Donda Ruu yelled out. “For this clan head meeting, the Suun clan head Zuuro Suun requested that the Fa house man the stove! That was suspicious enough that I felt the need to ask my son to keep an eye on the Suun settlement! The Suun clan really did go and do something truly vile, so I doubt any of you will speak ill of me for that! But if you still want to, that’s fine by me!” Donda Ruu’s eyes burned brighter than anyone else’s as he looked over his comrades. “I intend to determine tonight whether or not the Suun clan is fit to lead our people! You all should listen carefully to Zuuro Suun’s words, too! Listen, and help to determine our future!”

We had finally hit this point.

Zuuro Suun’s response could well thrust the Suun and Ruu into all out war. If the Zaza and Jeen and them abandoned the Suun, it at least wouldn’t become a large enough battle to split the forest’s edge in two, but still... Just what was going to happen?

Donda Ruu beckoned over Ludo Ruu, then took two swords from the boy. They must have come from Tei and Doddo Suun. One of them, he handed to Dan Rutim.

The clans under the Suun instantly started to grow

alarmed, but Donda Ruu shot them a glare.

"I swear to you that as long as none of the Suun draw their blades, I won't either! As long as they're not thirsty for blood, none will be shed this night!"

Then, Donda Ruu pounded strongly on the door of the main house. It was almost startling how quickly the door opened from the inside.

"What is it, so late at night...?" an emotionless woman's voice questioned.

I soon caught a glimpse of her, and she was truly beautiful. Yeah, she was stunning... but she had rotting fish eyes. Her hair was dark brown, and her eyes were blue. Although her face was lovely, it had no expression whatsoever, making her look like a clay doll.

As for her age, she probably fell somewhere in her late 20s. And proving that she was married, she had on a single piece dress and wore her hair short.

Standing at her feet was a very annoyed-looking Tsuvai Suun, who had previously disappeared at some point.

"Who the heck are you two?" Donda Ruu questioned, his eyes narrowing as he looked over the pair.

"I am the clan head Zuuro's wife, Oura Suun... This is my youngest daughter, Tsuvai Suun... Um, just what exactly is going on...?"

"I'm the Ruu clan head, Donda Ruu. Could you go tell the Suun clan head I'm asking to speak with him?"

"Right... However, at this hour he is still asleep..."

"Oh?" Donda Ruu replied, grinning like a wild beast.

"Sorry, but Zuuro Suun won't be allowed a peaceful rest tonight. The main house's eldest son, second son, and eldest daughter have broken the laws of the forest's edge alongside a man from one of the branch families. The clan head has a responsibility to answer for his family's crimes."

"Right..."

The woman who called herself Oura Suun looked over us with her listless eyes, still not showing the slightest bit of

emotion. When her muddy gaze finally caught sight of Tei Suun down on the ground, her eyes flickered ever so slightly.

Tei Suun's grey hair was dyed red, and he lay powerlessly down in the dirt, but he stared back at Oura Suun with the same look in his eyes.

"Very well... Tsvai, bring the clan head here..."

"Is that really alright, Mom?"

Tsvai Suun stared up at her mother with her big eyes, the whites standing out clearly.

"It's fine... We've done enough..."

"Alright," Tsvai Suun answered, then she took off back into the house.

Before long, Zuuro Suun appeared. His youngest son, Mida Suun, thumped out after him.

"What in the world is all this about, clan head of the Ruu? It's incredibly rude to visit someone's house so late at night, wouldn't you say...?"

Zuuro Suun wore a thin smile on his face that called to mind a bloated toad.

Meanwhile, as Mida Suun sluggishly stepped outside, he went, "Huh...?" in his usual high pitched voice. "It's Diga and Dodd... Hey, why are they all tied up...?"

"Hmm... I see you've been even more rude than I first thought..."

"Rude, you say? Didn't your daughter there already give you the basic story of what has happened, Zuuro Suun?"

Dan Rutim replied.

The daughter in question, Tsvai Suun, gave Mida Suun's legs a kick as they were blocking the door, then went running back to her mother.

The clan head, Zuuro Suun.

His wife, Oura Suun.

The youngest daughter, Tsvai Suun.

The youngest son, Mida Suun.

The eldest son, Diga Suun, who sat there sulking.

The second son, Dodd Suun, who still seemed to be

unconscious.

And Yamiru Suun, who was silently standing a bit removed.

Aside from the elderly former clan head, we seemed to have the full lineup of the main Suun house gathered.

As I continued to support Ai Fa with my shoulder, I gave a gulp.

“What happened...? Do you perhaps mean how Diga and Yamiru proposed to the Fa clan’s head and chef...?” Zuuro Suun replied, not sounding timid in the least despite all of the eyes fixed on him. “If that’s it, then I heard of that from them in advance... Still, I never imagined they would go and do it on the night of the clan head meeting...”

“Oh? Then you’re admitting that you gave your approval to their vile actions?” Donda Ruu asked, the grin on his face growing even bolder.

However, Zuuro Suun tilted his head and said, “‘Vile actions’...? What do you mean...? I don’t believe I’ve heard anything of the sort...”

“In that case, listen well. These fools went and put everyone in the ritual hall to sleep with a strange foreign herb, and on top of that forcefully kidnapped the Fa clan’s head and chef. Then, they drew a blade on the chef when he refused their marriage proposal, and bound the clan head’s limbs in order to have their way with her... That’s correct, isn’t it, members of the Fa clan?”

Ai Fa silently nodded, while I answered, “Yes.”

However, Zuuro Suun’s thin smile still didn’t vanish.

Was he feeling bold, or was he just slow...? Somehow, it felt like the latter to me.

“That’s certainly quite an accusation... Just who are you saying went and did something that foolish...?”

“The second son of the main house, and that man from the branch families lying beside him.”

“Hmm... Doddo’s always had a problem when it comes to alcohol...” Zuuro Suun said, the corners of his mouth rising

up higher. "He must have lost his temper when his precious elder sister's marriage proposal was turned down... You have my deepest apologies..."

"Do you really think apologies are going to be enough, Zuuro Suun? He may be a foreigner, but this chef is a member of the Fa clan. And as you can see, my son suffered these injuries when jumping in to stop them. They didn't just draw their blades, but went so far as to threaten the lives of our fellow people of the forest's edge!"

Ludo Ruu had cloth wrapped around his head in place of bandages, and he gave a bit of a dissatisfied sounding "Tch."

"That second son of yours also drew his blade in the post town and at the Rutim banquet. And with this incident, he finally went and swung it at our people. There's no way such an action can be forgiven simply by bowing your head."

"Hmm... Then are you saying we should follow the law and have him offer up his right arm...?"

"You really think just his right arm would cut it?"

A raging fire was now burning away in Donda Ruu's eyes as he fiercely grinned.

Then, a large figure pushed through the crowd and angrily shouted, "That's right! They didn't just draw their blades, but also used their poisonous herb on us as well! They harmed not only the Suun and Ruu, but all the clan heads of the forest's edge! A single right arm won't be anywhere near enough to pay for such a crime!"

That had come from the Sauti clan head, Dari Sauti. His earnest-looking face was red from the anger and humiliation.

Zuuro Suun's eyebrows drooped ever so slightly.

"What's this poisonous herb you're talking about...? You said it put everyone in the ritual hall to sleep...?"

"Apparently it's an herb called melemele that they bought from an eastern sorcerer. Your sons bragged that it cost them five white coins to buy enough," I replied. I figured since I had heard that directly, I should be the one to

answer.

"Hmm... So it's an herb that puts people to sleep...?"

"Yes. They said if someone keeps smelling its smoke, they wouldn't wake up even if their stomach was slit."

"I see... But if it just puts people to sleep, it's not exactly poisonous, now is it...?" Zuuro Suun said, his eyes firmly fixed on his sons for the first time.

With that, Diga Suun broke out in a triumphant grin.

"Melemele leaves are herbs for helping people who are suffering to sleep easily! I hear if you keep smelling it for half a day it'll even put a person's soul to sleep, but that small amount isn't poison at all! Otherwise, we never would have had our brethren from the forest's edge smell it!"

"Silence, you! That's not what we're discussing right now!" Dari Sauti raged. "The key point is that you all used such a vile method, isn't it?! You played your trick on all of us, forcefully abducted the members of the Fa clan, tried to force them into marriage, and then decided to kill them when they refused... Do you truly believe such blatant defiance of our laws would ever be allowed here at the forest's edge?!"

"Yes, such actions are of course unforgivable... Just what exactly were your intentions, Diga...?"

Dari Sauti's furious expression had caused Diga Suun to turn pale, but he regained that repulsive grin upon hearing his father's words.

"Naturally, we had no intention of actually taking any lives. Doddo and I were just drunk, so we said and did things we didn't really mean."

"Oh? But the second son and this old timer really did draw their blades. And they went and tried to kill all of us. So how do you intend on explaining all that away?"

Diga Suun grinned even deeper upon hearing what Ludo Ruu had to say.

"I don't know anything about all that. I wasn't there, after all. Doddo and Tei Suun both probably just let alcohol get

the better of them and ended up doing it.”

“Right, and you bound Ai Fa’s limbs and tried to have your way with her, but that ended in failure,” Ludo Ruu said with a shrug of his shoulders, only for Dari Sauti to step forward again.

“That’s every bit as serious of a taboo as drawing your blade! You already broke it two years prior, and swore back then that you would never again make the same mistake, didn’t you?!”

“L-Like I said, this time it was a request to take her as my bride. I didn’t do anything that would justify you yapping at me like that.”

“That’s ridiculous... No method of proposing at the forest’s edge involves using an herb to put someone to sleep, binding their limbs, and trying to have your way with them!”

“Oh...? No matter how much a woman may hate you, if you just lay with her she’ll listen to you.”

Naturally, I took a step forward without even thinking, but Ai Fa held me back with a poke to the head.

“Don’t lose your cool. He won’t be able to talk his way out of this with such nonsense, anyway,” she whispered quietly into my ear.

But was that really the case? Then why did Zuuro and Diga Suun still look so calm and collected?

Diga Suun was one thing, since he didn’t seem to fully grasp everything, but it was creepy how Zuuro Suun had kept on smiling even though he seemed to value self-preservation above all else.

“Hey! Who goes there?!” Rau Lea suddenly yelled out in a harsh tone.

The other men around us all started muttering among themselves. But when I looked closer, I saw that there was another group surrounding them too. They looked to be around 30 in number.

With my eyesight, all I could make out in this darkness

were black silhouettes. However, the only ones in this settlement other than us were the members of the Suun's branch houses. And so, that was who they must have been. That seemed to fit with the numbers I had heard, too.

"Oh...? You wish to settle things by the blade, Zuuro Suun?" Donda Ruu asked, grabbing hold of his sword's handle.

However, Zuuro Suun lost his cool a bit for the first time as he replied, "O-Of course not... It just seems the members of the branch families questioned why there was such a commotion so late at night and came to check... P-Please, restrain your temper, clan head of the Ruu..."

"Hmph, I'm not so sure about that," Donda Ruu replied, breaking out in a rather nasty looking smile.

Of the 30 or so members of the Suun branch families, roughly half of them were men. In terms of numbers, the Ruu and the clans under them could more or less match that. However, only five of them had blades.

Plus, if it came down to a fight, there was no telling what the clans under the Suun would do, and the Ruu women were gathered here. There was just too much up in the air at the moment, so getting rough would definitely be a bad idea.

"Ludo, you go over with the women. And make sure you don't make the first move, alright?"

"Got it," Ludo Ruu replied, running over towards his family, his eyes gleaming with the soul of a hunter.

"Now then, could you tell me just how you intend on settling this, Zuuro Suun? You couldn't possibly believe just bowing your head would be enough to have such great crimes pardoned, right?"

"Hmm... Then do you mean to say we should adhere strictly to our customs in having them pay for their crimes, clan head of the Ruu...?" Zuuro Suun questioned, his thin smile returning. "Doddo and Tei Suun injured our brethren with their blades. Diga tried to have his way with a woman.

Normally, that would mean Doddo and Tei Suun should offer up their right arms, while Diga... What should we do with Diga? After all, he didn't ultimately sully the Fa clan head's purity, did he?"

"That is only because the Fa clan happened to prove more determined than that scum. According to the customs, he should lose his offending organ for that," Donda Ruu stated, clearly annoyed. "And that's not the full extent of their crimes. What about the fact that they tried to do our brethren harm with that poisonous herb?"

"I'd like to hear your thoughts on that. Considering it didn't actually cause anyone harm, just how serious of a crime is it...? In fact, is such a thing even against our laws to begin with...?"

"Trying to use such a trick against our people clearly breaks our taboos!"

"But when did they actually try to fool anyone...? My sons simply gave everyone a peaceful sleep so that no one would interfere with the marriage proposals, didn't they...?"

Dari Sauti silently started to approach Zuuro Suun. However, Donda Ruu raised an arm to hold him back.

"Then your intention is to offer up your second son and branch family member's right arms, as well as your eldest son's member to atone for these crimes, Zuuro Suun? I don't think your sons have the guts for that, though."

"If we're following ancient customs, then that would be the proper path," Zuuro Suun replied, then he broke out in a grin. "But if you value those old laws so highly... Then there's something else you should do before questioning my sons' crimes, isn't there...?"

"What...?"

"I'm saying that the Ruu, Rutim, and Fa must also obey those same laws..." Then, Zuuro Suun's greasy gaze fell on me. "Chef of the Fa clan... My daughter Yamiru offered to take you as her husband, did she not...?"

I silently glared back at his creepy smiling face.

Could it be... I thought to myself, an eerie doubt creeping in on me. *Could that have been this crafty bastard's trump card? But that's an absolutely insane trick to pull, isn't it?*

"At that time, was Yamiru perhaps in the middle of performing an ancient ritual...? One for making the power of a giba's blood your own..."

I was too shocked for words.

"If that was the case, then Yamiru must have been completely in the nude..."

"Zuuro Suun, you bastard...!" Donda Ruu bellowed.

"Also, clan head of the Ruu, you had your son and that other boy watch over the Fa clan's chef from the shadows... In that case, did they perhaps spy Yamiru through a window...?" Then, Zuuro Suun's gaze shifted over to Dan Rutim, who was standing by Donda Ruu's side. "And clan head of the Rutim... You kicked down the door of Diga's house and stepped inside without being invited, didn't you...?"

"What of it?" Dan Rutim replied, the anger clearly showing on his face.

By this point, everyone was fully aware of what Zuuro Suun was trying to say.

"Entering another's home without permission is also a taboo... In that case, those who saw Yamiru's naked body should each offer up an eye, while those who entered Diga's house must give up a toe, yes...?"

"That's ridiculous! Then what about how that scum there broke into the Fa house two years ago?!"

"That incident was forgiven when Diga and I bowed our heads, wasn't it...? Of course, I don't wish to give such weight to old customs and shed the blood of my brethren..."

"So that's how it is..." Donda Ruu muttered. The smile he wore was that of a fierce raging god. "So what you're trying to say is that if we want their arms, we've got to offer up our eyes and toes, eh, Zuuro Suun?"

"Naturally, I truly hope to avoid shedding blood over

such trivial matters...”

“How dare you spin such a tale, Zuuro Suun?!” Dari Sauti shouted. “The Suun clan are the ones who went and acted so atrociously! The Ruu, Rutim, and Fa simply fought back against that! So why must they offer up their eyes and toes?!”

“Those are simply the laws of the forest’s edge... However, they are old traditions decided by our ancestors... I don’t believe sticking firmly to them is the one and only correct path for our people...”

“And I’m saying that’s not the issue here! My point is that the shameful actions of these members of the Suun clan are unforgivable!”

“Shameful actions, you say...? But in actuality, Doddodo didn’t take a single life, nor did Diga sully anyone’s purity...”

“As Donda Ruu stated, that was solely due to the determination of the Fa and Ruu! If they had not been strong enough, your kin would have carried out their truly vile deeds!”

“If they had been successful, they would have had to give their lives to pay for their crimes...”

There was no end to this argument.

Dari Sauti, meanwhile, seemed to have surpassed mere anger and ended up outright dumbfounded.

“Have you gone mad, Zuuro Suun...? If that is how you truly feel, then we can no longer see you as the leader of our people.”

“Oh? And why is that, clan head of the Sauti? It’s true that Diga and Doddodo are still too immature to properly rein in their emotions, but no one was killed, and no woman was sullied. In fact, none can even say if my sons truly intended on committing those crimes, can they...?” Zuuro Suun’s muddy gaze then turned towards Donda Ruu. “Just look. Can you not see the hatred in the Ruu clan head’s eyes as he glares at me...? He may even be thinking of threatening my life... However, until he actually swings the blade he holds

my way, he has committed no crime at all... That's the point I'm trying to stress..."

"That just sounds like you trying to talk your way out of this! The leading clan should act as a model for the people of the forest's edge, shouldn't they?!"

"Hmm... Then I suppose there's no option left but for both sides to shed blood. How truly regrettable..." Zuuro Suun stated, but he didn't look the least bit regretful.

But... maybe this man was stating his true thoughts. Perhaps he honestly thought that if he couldn't eloquently talk his way out of this, his only option left was to offer up his family. Did he intend to maintain the peace for the Suun clan through the sacrifice of Diga, Doddo, Tei, and Yamiru Suun? The smile on Zuuro Suun's face looked so relaxed that no other possibilities seemed to fit.

As I held back the nausea building inside of me, I stole a glance at the man's family in question.

Diga Suun foolishly laughed to himself like he had no clue what was happening, while Doddo Suun was still unconscious. Tei Suun's muddy gaze stared blankly into the sky as he lay on his side like a corpse. And Yamiru Suun was just as expressionless as always.

From my point of view, they were all unforgivable criminals. Well, I did have a few thoughts in regards to Tei and Yamiru Suun, but their crimes still stood.

But to Zuuro Suun, they were his precious family, weren't they? Even if this was a case of them acting recklessly all on their own, shouldn't he have been more desperately trying to cover for them? Or did he value his own peace and tranquility over even the lives of his family?

Just what exactly did the world look like through this man's muddy eyes?

"So that's your response, Zuuro Suun...?" Donda Ruu questioned, firming up his stance.

Mida Suun had been just standing there in a daze up till now, but he muttered, "This is no good... People of the

forest's edge shouldn't hurt each other, right...?" As he said that, he reached for the club at his hip.

Donda Ruu also grabbed hold of his sword's handle.

And Zuuro Suun's smile stiffened a good bit as he attempted to slowly back away.

"No matter what, don't leave my side, Asuta," Ai Fa whispered while taking her right arm off my neck and bending her knees just a bit.

All of the men in my field of vision were preparing for battle.

There had clearly been a breakdown in negotiations.

It seemed that Zuuro Suun absolutely refused to admit fault, no matter what. Even if he had to cast aside his family to do it, he would make sure he alone was saved.

There was no way Donda Ruu could ever accept that nature of his. Even if he had to break his promise not to draw his blade first and get branded a traitor, he would surely cut Zuuro Suun down here and now. That was what the determination burning bright in his eyes told me.

We had finally reached the tipping point.

For a split second I agonized over the decision, but then I yelled out, "Please, hold on! If we're following ancient laws, then there's something the Suun clan needs to atone for before all else!"

Donda Ruu had been on the verge of drawing his blade, only for his shoulders to flinch ever so slightly.

"Asuta...?" Ai Fa questioned in a doubtful tone.

I gave her a nod back, then continued on, "If I recall correctly, it's a serious enough crime to warrant having one's scalp peeled. Do you really have the right to question the crimes of others before you atone for that?"

"What... What in the world are you saying...?"

The toadlike smile had completely vanished from Zuuro Suun's bloated face. The terror that took its place gave me confidence that my thinking was correct.

My words may well lead to even further bloodshed, but

even as my spine trembled at the thought, I still threw out my accusation.

"If you deny my statement, then show us the main Suun house's pantry... That's my only request."

In that instant, Yamiru Suun erupted in a mad burst of laughter. Though she was surrounded by the Ruu and Rutim women, it was like she couldn't stop herself from leaning her head back and howling away. "What are you saying? Why should we need to be scalped? This is slander against the leading clan!"

"R-Right, it's slander! You're just spouting nonsense and trying to save your own skin..." Zuuro Suun uttered, temporarily regaining his calm expression only for it to be shattered by astonishment and despair a moment later.

"Yes, it's truly unforgivable slander! We have done nothing to warrant such abuse! And if you think I'm lying, then why not confirm this with your own eyes?"

"What are you saying?! Have you gone mad, Yamiru?!" That last bit of wailing actually came from Diga Suun rather than his father. And both of them had equally pale faces at the moment.

"What's the matter? Why have you all gone so pale? We're perfectly innocent, aren't we?" Then, Yamiru Suun's glittering eyes turned towards Oura Suun, who was standing there like a statue. "Now then, Oura! And Tsvai, too! Open up the pantry! Then our innocence will be made clear!"

Tsvai Suun looked up at her mother, clearly at a loss. As for Oura Suun, her muddy pupils were hidden behind her eyelids.

"Right... That is what we should do, isn't it, Yamiru...?"

"Yes! Go ahead and do it!"

Oura Suun moved to turn towards the pantry. However, Zuuro Suun grabbed tight onto her slender shoulder.

"Stop! What... What do you think you're doing?!"

"Let go of me..."

"Never! As clan head... I'll never permit you to do that!"

Zuuro Suun's fat fingers dug into his wife's shoulder.

Oura Suun shrieked out, "Ah..." in pain, causing Tsvai Suun to wail, "What are you doing?!"

Donda Ruu took a step forward. Before he could make a move, though, Mida Suun's thick fingers grabbed hold of his father's arm.

"That's not good... It's bad to hurt family, isn't it...?"

His bones audibly creaked, and Zuuro Suun let out a girlish screech.

Released from his grasp, Oura Suun collapsed powerlessly to the ground, then looked up at Tsvai Suun's face. There was just a bit of a shine, as her eyes were full of tears.

"Tsvai... The bolt to the pantry..."

"...Got it," Tsvai Suun replied, then disappeared through a door.

At the same time, Yamiru Suun laughed like a devil as she proclaimed, "Now, see with your own eyes! If it's proven that your words are nothing but a groundless accusation, you won't get off with just losing an eye or a toe, Asuta of the Fa clan!"

"What's with that woman? Has she actually gone mad?" Dan Rutim turned and asked me, his thick eyebrows deeply furrowed. "I don't get what you've been saying, either. Did she trick you with some sort of plot?"

"No, I don't think that's it... If that were the case, I couldn't imagine Zuuro Suun looking that flustered." I then turned my gaze towards Donda Ruu. "Let's head to the pantry. And I think it'd be a good idea to keep an eye on the members of the Suun branch families."

Donda Ruu silently stared back at me for a bit, then turned without saying a word.

Rau Lea and the other men who fell under the Ruu lifted up Diga and Doddo Suun.

Diga Suun's expression slumped, and he looked utterly dumbfounded. Doddo Suun, meanwhile, was *still*

unconscious.

And as for Tei Suun... He had firmly shut his eyes, like Oura Suun had done just a bit ago.

"Mida Suun, could I ask you to bring Zuuro Suun and follow along?"

"Yeah..." Mida Suun replied to my question, the fat of his cheeks shaking as he did so. "But what are you saying about the pantry? We can't eat anything else till morning, right...?"

"That's true. But we're just checking what's inside."

With that, we moved around to the back of the house.

Our group included the men who participated in the clan head meeting, the women who manned the stove, the members of the Suun main house, and everyone from the branch families... It was a big enough crowd to total over 100 people.

The majority of them still didn't understand what was going on and were just silently looking around at everyone else.

And then, as all of us watched, the door to the pantry swung open from the inside.

Tsuwai Suun came running back over towards her mother, looking unbelievably upset.

Then, Rau Lea held up a candle to illuminate the inside of the pantry.

"That's...!" someone gasped in astonishment.

What we saw there was exactly what I had expected: All manners of fruits and vegetables. Some I was familiar with, but others I had never seen before.

Yes, the shelves were positively packed... with the bounty of the Morga forest, which they were forbidden to gather by decree of the western capital.

"So that was it..." Donda Ruu muttered in a low voice.

And then... a sound of "Aaaah..." with an almost singing tone resounded through the night air.

"What? What's going on?!" Dan Rutim questioned, his gaze darting around.

Everyone making that sound seemed to belong to the Suun branch families. That included men and women, children and the elderly... Every last one of them were down on their knees, their sad voices echoing forth.

“Please forgive us...”

“We broke the taboo...”

“We gathered the blessings of the forest, knowing it was forbidden...”

Then, before our very eyes, Oura Suun fell powerlessly to her knees.

“This is the Suun clan’s crime... But please, take mercy on the members of the branch families... They only followed the wicked decrees of the main house...”

Oura Suun’s beautiful face was stained with tears. The members of the branch families were no different. One fell prostrate to the ground, while another tore at his scalp, and yet another clung to someone nearby... And every last one of them was weeping with heartrending grief.

“H-Hey! Come on, pull yourselves together!” Lala Ruu suddenly yelled out, sounding all flustered.

There was an even more slender girl clinging to her own thin body, wailing away. She just kept saying, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry...” over and over. From what I could tell, it was Toor Suun of the branch families.

“This is insane... The whole of the Suun clan was breaking such an important taboo...?” the Zaza clan head muttered in a powerless voice, his massive frame trembling as if he was terrified of the wailing coming from all around.

Eating the blessings of the forest was one of the greatest taboos for the people of the forest’s edge. Doing so meant that starving giba would attack the fields around town even more fiercely. That’s why it was considered a serious enough crime to warrant being scalped for it.

And so, the people of the forest’s edge would never lay a hand on them no matter how much they may be starving, to the point that they would die lamenting their own weakness.

Kamyua Yoshu had once said he couldn't believe such an earnest, pure tribe could truly exist.

That was down to their pride as hunters.

"We sullied our pride as hunters... Trampled on the honor of the forest's edge... We're unforgivable sinners..."

A flood of tears kept on streaming down the faces of Oura Suun and the branch family members. There was an unquestionable sadness dwelling in their tear-soaked eyes. Feelings of regret surely swirled through their heads. And it was readily apparent the shame that they felt.

Those were all clearly negative emotions... But now, not a one of them wore the expressionless face of a clay doll.

Their unforgivable crime was revealed, but at the same time, they had been set free. The intense pressure of needing to protect the Suun clan's secret no longer crushed them.

On the other hand, Zuuro and Diga Suun's faces now looked like corpses as they trembled away.

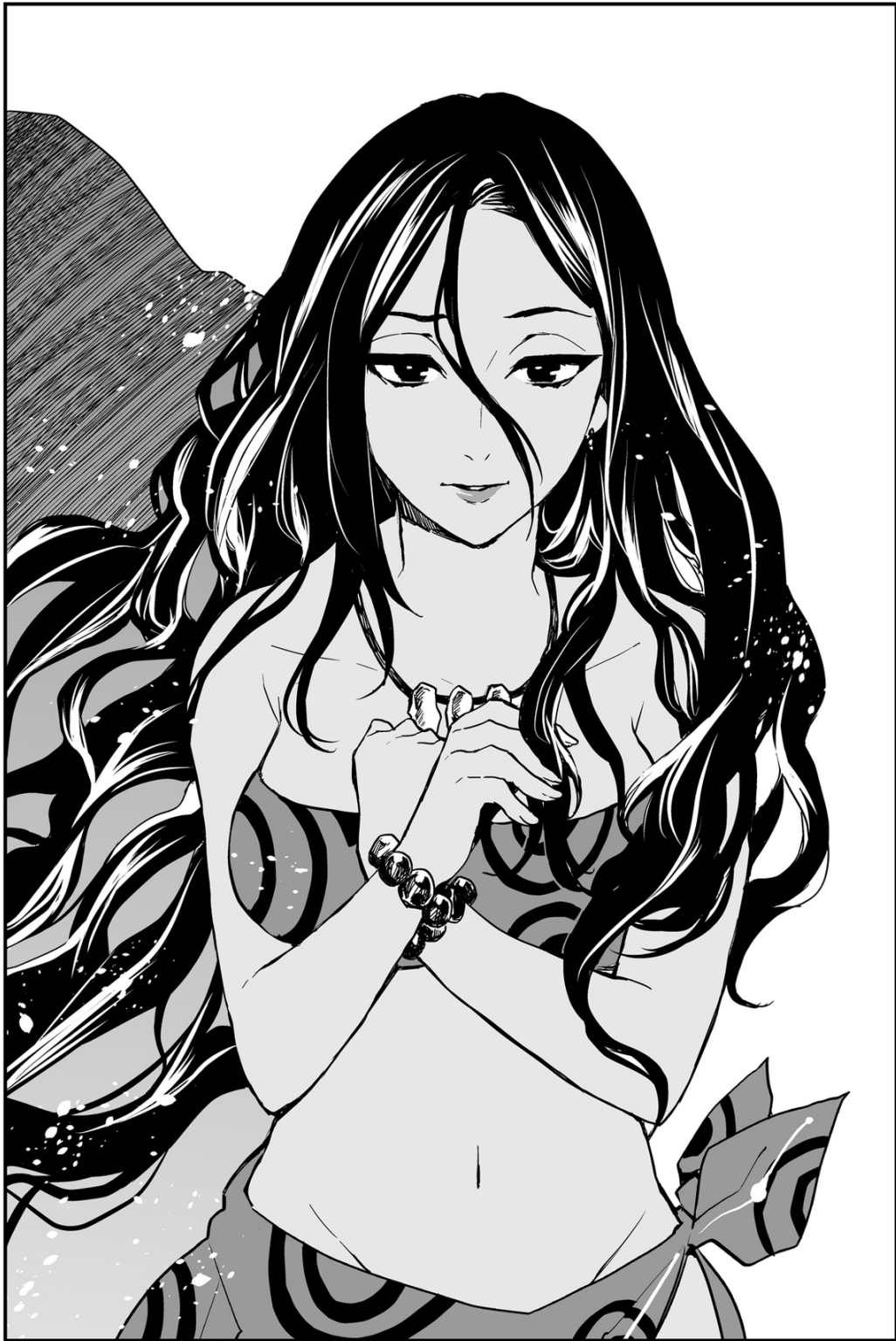
Doddo Suun was still lying unconscious, even now.

Mida Suun looked down on his father and brothers, his eyes full of confusion.

Tsuwai Suun nuzzled up close to her weeping mother and was firmly biting down on her lip.

And as for Yamiru Suun... she walked up to us, sandwiched between Ludo and Mia Lea Ruu. Ai Fa still had her guard up, though, not relaxing in the least.

Then, she stopped in front of us and quietly whispered, "Now it's finally over..."



Yamiru Suun's expression was now so calm that it was hard to believe she had been acting so madly just a bit ago, and she had a complex expression about her eyes that couldn't be described as just sadness, anger, or joy alone.

"Asuta... There's just one thing I wish to say to you."

"What is it?"

I still couldn't tell at all which emotions were driving her, but the corners of Yamiru Suun's mouth lifted up into a grin, and she said, "Thank you for destroying the Suun clan."

3

The dawn had broken at last on the chaotic night.

After crawling out of the ritual hall, I gave both my arms a big stretch while squinting my eyes from the brightness of the morning sun.

"That really was an unbelievable night..." Ai Fa muttered with a frown, coming up beside me.

"That's for sure. It was so insane that it's hard to believe it really happened. What in the world's going to become of the forest's edge now?"

"Who knows? But, well... I can't imagine it getting worse than it's been. We'll be striving our hardest to make sure that it doesn't," Ai Fa stated as she put up her hair, her face brimming with strength now that she was completely free of the effects of the melemele leaves.

The other clan heads came on out in the meantime, so we made way for them to stagger by.

The emergency clan head meeting that had been running all night had come to a close.



Thanks to the questioning carried out by the clan heads, the Suun clan's crimes were thoroughly brought to light.

First off, the Suun clan had been gathering the blessings of the forest for over a decade. Apparently, Zuuro Suun became clan head ten years back, so the deed went back to the time of the previous head, Zattsu Suun.

They hunted giba just for the meat, and got all of their vegetables from the forest. They used the reward money along with what they got from horns and tusks to buy everyday goods, fruit wine, and salt. And the members of the main house splurged on their own amusement, too.

The members of the branch families, meanwhile, were coerced into keeping the secret. If it got out, all of the Suun would have to offer up their scalps. They were forced into being accomplices, and for over a decade had to suppress their pride and dignity as people of the forest's edge.

Perhaps as a result of that, many in the Suun settlement lived short lives. They were supposed to be living lives of far more plenty and tranquility than any other clan, and yet there was no end to folks dying mysteriously of emaciation.

"That may have been because they couldn't find meaning in living such overly peaceful lives..." Oura Suun had suggested.

Apparently, that trend was especially strong among those who married into the clan. Except for Oura Suun, all of Zuuro Suun's wives had come from subordinate clans like the Zaza and Jeen.

Even when that wasn't the case, those who weren't well suited to such alien circumstances tended to die young. And thanks to that happening so often, they were chronically short-handed, which caused them to firmly refuse sending any brides or grooms to the clans under them.

Of course, that made perfect sense. After all, throughout the Suun settlement everyone was under pressure to protect the secret. They could hardly let anyone who knew of what they had done go off on their own.

Still, that all just felt far too unnatural. At the forest's edge, blood ties were valued above all else, after all. The

clans under the Suun must have felt a great deal of resentment over the fact that they hadn't been offered any brides or grooms for over a decade. That must have been one of the big reasons that Yamiru Suun had said, "It's not possible to keep deceiving the clans under us."

So why did the Suun clan try to take in the two of us from the Fa? It seemed the goal was to use the money we earned to buy aria and poitan, so they could stop laying hands on the blessings of the forest. If they could pull that off, then they could forever wipe away their unpleasant secret.

"What the heck?! That's so stupid! In that case, all they needed to do was go out and properly hunt giba, right?!" Dan Rutim had stated, foremost among the great many enraged clan heads.

But having tasted depravity, the folks of the main house... or I should say the clan head Zuuro Suun, couldn't even envision such a thing.

Plus, even if they wanted to hunt giba, the beasts hardly ever came anywhere near the Suun settlement. That was only logical, though. The giba lived off the fruits of the forest, so they naturally wouldn't settle down where such things were lacking.

In other words, that was the cause of the increase in giba in recent years.

Thanks to the Suun clan shirking their duties as hunters the number of giba had grown, and by gathering food from the forest they had caused them to move elsewhere. As a result, a significantly greater burden was placed on the other clans.

At any rate, the situation had just been continually worsening. Even if someone from the branch families decided to ignore the main house and carry out their work as a hunter, they wouldn't be able to get anything done without any giba around. On top of that, in the Suun settlement they were hunting the bare minimum of giba, to the point that they had more of a shortage of meat than

vegetables.

On the other hand, while the number of giba was decreasing, small animals like lizards and snakes were thriving, so a good number of folks were apparently using meat from those to fend off starvation. But the members of the main house instead bought kimyuus and karon meat for the same purpose.

“Still, why go out of their way to intentionally go after the Fa on the day of the clan head meeting? Actually, if they were planning on a forceful kidnapping to start with, why not attack the Fa house directly rather than inviting anyone to the Suun settlement?”

The one to voice that question had been Dari Sauti.

Such a barbaric act surely would have been possible with a secret weapon like the melemele leaves. They would have been able to carry out their goal quite smoothly by just putting me and Ai Fa to sleep, then cutting through a window lattice using a saw or whatever.

The answer to that came from Yamiru Suun. According to her, with a building set half-underground like the ritual hall that also has completely sealable entrances, just lighting the melemele leaves with a candle and leaving it there is enough. But a normal house has windows with latices, which makes it rather difficult to get the smoke to settle inside.

Sure enough, I couldn't imagine Ai Fa failing to notice if I was grilling a fish or something and fanning the smoke right outside the window.

“Still, I just can't see it as anything but idiotic. Did you really think you would get away with wrongdoing when all the clan heads were gathered together in one place? I'm embarrassed to say I was fully asleep, but I still can't imagine anyone sane coming up with such a plan.”

“That's true... However, it still seemed wiser than attacking the Fa house directly. Considering how strong the Fa clan head supposedly is, Diga and Doddodo couldn't possibly defeat her,” Yamiru Suun replied in a detached

tone.

Dari Sauti's rage-filled gaze fixed on the woman.

"Let me confirm once again. Zuuro Suun came up with the idea of forcing the members of the Fa to join the Suun clan, while you, the eldest son, and the second son planned out the details, correct?"

"Yes, that's true."

"The ones who actually committed crimes were your two brothers and Tei Suun, but you are no less at fault."

"You don't need to go and emphasize that point now."

Yamiru Suun's expression was so calm that it actually felt bizarre.

"Hold on, please," I tried to interject.

However, Ai Fa grabbed my arm when I went to do so.

"Don't do it. This isn't the time or place for us to speak up."

"No, but..."

The Suun clan's way of doing things had been far too crude. And so, I couldn't help but think that Yamiru Suun had wished for failure rather than success, and destruction for her clan rather than prosperity.

Thinking back on it, Yamiru Suun had been the one to invite us to the clan head meeting. Apparently, she had only gotten the clan head Zuuro Suun's permission afterwards.

And no matter what she had to say on the matter, the downsides to attempting their scheme at such an event were far too great.

Plus, the greatest of their taboos lay in their pantry, so no matter how well bolted it may have been, it just seemed insane to let anyone from another clan get anywhere near it. Plus, Yamiru Suun had actually gone and said, "Or are you dim-witted enough to not have noticed, even after manning the Suun clan stove...?"

She may well have also wished to keep on living with her family. However, had she wanted to put an end to the corrupt history of the Suun clan even more than that?

"I'm at least capable of imagining what's running through your head. But even so, don't do it. In all likelihood, no matter what you say, you won't be able to erase the eldest daughter's crime. In fact, it might just result in even greater anger," Ai Fa whispered in a low voice.

"Why?" I asked back just as quietly.

"Even if your thinking is correct, that doesn't change the fact that she betrayed the people of the forest's edge, and she may just be seen as guilty of tricking her blood relatives in addition... At the forest's edge, betraying and attempting to harm one's family is the greatest of taboos, Asuta."

I had no response to that.

I mean, had Yamiru Suun really brought all of these outside powers in to lower the blade of judgment down on all the Suun clan's necks, her own included?

As I agonized over the matter, the clan head meeting solemnly continued on.

At any rate, there was a topic that had to be settled as soon as possible. Naturally, that was how the Suun clan would be handled.

"The Suun clan is no longer worthy to lead our people!" Dari Sauti proclaimed.

Not a single person voiced an objection to his words.

But just how should they have to atone for their crimes, then?

Fortunately, at the very least no one seemed interested in punishing the branch families for their complicity. That included even clans like the Zaza and Jeen who valued the law especially highly.

But then, whose crimes should be judged?

That was where things got complicated.

"We should follow the law, so every last member of the main house should have their scalps peeled."

"No, but then it doesn't make sense to forgive the branch families."

"Then what about just the clan head, Zuuro Suun...?"

“But he carried on that wicked policy from the previous clan head.”

“The former clan head Zattsu Suun is elderly and ill, though, so he can’t have long left...”

“No, but still—”

“Ugh, this is obnoxious! Is there never going to be an end to this?!” Dan Rutim exploded. Then, his goggle-eyes shifted my way. “Asuta, what do you think?”

“Huh? Me?”

“Yeah. You’re the one who exposed the Suun clan’s wrongdoing, so it makes sense for you to run things now, doesn’t it?”

That was completely insane moon logic.

But still, I was glad to get the chance to make a statement. After all, I did have a few thoughts on the matter.

“I think... What’s most important is what happens from here on out.”

“Here on out?”

“Yes. Rather than giving in to anger and focusing on how to punish the Suun clan, instead figure out the correct path forward for the forest’s edge, and handle them according to that.”

“You’re getting all tricky with your words like Gazraan again. Can’t you make things a little easier to understand?”

“Ah, my apologies. To sum it up, I think before deciding on the Suun clan’s punishment, we should determine what sort of relationship the forest’s edge should have with Genos now that it’s lost its leading clan.”

Dan Rutim and the rest of the clan heads all looked clearly confused. Perhaps they had never expected to hear the name “Genos” come up in this place.

“I still don’t get it. Who cares about the city of stone? It’s not like we want the reward money or anything. In fact, it’d feel refreshing to use this chance to go ahead and sever our ties with the castle.”

“You can’t just do that though, can you? After all, the law

that the blessings of the Morga forest must not be touched was something Genos decreed. In fact, wasn't this act like trampling upon the bond and trust shared with the city of stone? And even more importantly, isn't the rule that the people of the forest's edge wouldn't lay a hand on such things one of the terms of the agreement that allows your people to live here?"

With that, the clan heads started muttering amongst themselves.

"Of course, Genos needs the people of the forest's edge, too. You were able to carve out an important role for yourselves over the course of these past 80 years. If you were to leave this land, Genos's prosperity would take a significant hit. That's why I think you should strive to form a better, more proper relationship with them from here on out."

"Hmm... Well, now that you mention it, that may be so..."

Despite his words, Dan Rutim's face made it appear that he still didn't quite get it. Perhaps that just went to show how distant and unrelated the Genos castle had felt to everyone but the Suun clan.

I felt then that the worries growing inside me should be known, and so I threw out the bomb that I had been saving.

"I'm including my own speculation here, but I think... There's a chance that the folks from the Genos castle were aware the Suun clan was breaking laws, and they simply turned a blind eye to it."

"What?! What do you mean?!"

"Ai Fa and I have become acquainted with someone with ties to the lord of Genos. That man was troubled by the Suun clan's corruption, and said he had offered advice to the lord on the matter more than once. Putting aside the issue of them plundering the blessings of the forest, the Genos lord must have already heard of the fact that the Suun clan was shirking their duty as hunters and living so lazily."

The murmuring spread even further.

It felt like I was speaking ill of the dead or something, but even so, I still had to say it.

“Plus, I’ve seen with my very eyes a member of the Suun clan committing a crime in the post town only to have it overlooked. Thanks to that, it’s led to rumors that no matter what crimes the people of the forest’s edge commit, they won’t be punished. What led to the Suun clan’s corruption wasn’t just the reward money, but that unjustly favorable treatment by Genos, wouldn’t you say?”

With that, I glanced over the members of the main Suun house, who had been forced to sit the farthest from the head of the room. Aside from the former clan head Zattsu Suun, the full group of seven was gathered there.

Zuuro Suun had lost all his strength and looked like a corpse at this point.

Diga Suun’s body was constantly quaking with terror.

Doddo Suun had finally regained consciousness, and he hung his head in a way that made him look like a stray dog on the verge of death.

Mida Suun was nodding off, clearly not understanding what was going on in the least.

Yamiru Suun wore no expression whatsoever as she stared down at her feet.

Oura Suun was sitting up straight and staring vacantly at the ceiling with tears in her eyes.

Tsuwai Suun was sulking while clinging to her mother’s arm.

And the sole criminal of the branch families, Tei Suun, was seated lowest of them all and had firmly shut his eyes.

“I have no intention of covering for the Suun clan. But I believe the majority of the cause of their corruption comes from their ties to the lord of Genos, including the reward money. In other words, having the wrong sort of relationship with Genos can lead to the downfall of even the people of the forest’s edge.”

“Asuta, I can’t help but take that as an insult to our

people,” Dari Sauti chimed in, his voice rather tense despite not sounding especially angry.

I turned his way and replied, “Really? But originally, the Suun clan must have been strong enough to lead the forest’s edge, right? Doesn’t it make sense that they took in that poison bit by bit over the course of 80 years, losing their way as they went? If that was because they took on a bond with the people of the castle on their own... Then as someone forming ties to the townsfolk while earning excess fortune, I can’t just treat that as someone else’s problem.”

“Hmm...”

“Excess fortune can be both poison and medicine. That’s just like we discussed at dinner. Who will lead the people of the forest’s edge in place of the Suun? What should be done with the reward money? What should the relationship with Genos be like from here on out? Aren’t those questions every bit as important as how the Suun clan should be punished?”

“That’s true, of course. But the only clan as strong as the Suun are the Ruu, and if even the Suun fell to corruption as such... Just what should be done, then?” Dari Sauti questioned, looking at Donda Ruu with a probing gaze.

Donda Ruu, meanwhile, shot back a bold grin.

“Do you all intend to keep on talking in circles forever, not sleeping a wink even though it’s this late at night? The strongest lead the forest’s edge, while weak clans don’t have the right to do so. You all understand that without having to think about it, don’t you?”

“Then you’re announcing the Ruu as the new leading clan after all?”

“Ha! I could clearly see that the Suun clan would fall someday. And so sooner or later, we were fated to end up heading down this path.” Donda Ruu slowly stood to his feet, then glanced around at all of the hunters present. “As the clan head of the Ruu, I offer this statement to all the clan heads of the forest’s edge. The Ruu have six clans to our

name, and over 100 people. No other clan at the forest's edge possesses such power... None of you have any objection to that claim, do you?"

Sure enough, nobody objected.

Donda Ruu's grin grew even bolder.

"Meanwhile, the Suun had seven clans under them, and similarly around 100 people. But removing the Suun clan for their criminal acts, that leaves around 70... Will it be the Zaza who leads them? The Dom?"

"Such a matter won't be decided here and now. For the time being, the Zaza, Jeen, and Dom will simply have to work together to guide our people," the Zaza clan head replied in a low voice, a regretful light burning in his eyes.

"I see," Donda Ruu answered, then he turned his gaze towards Dari Sauti. "The next strongest clan would be the Sauti, right? How great are your bonds of blood?"

"The Sauti leads five clans, and we number less than 60. We are far from reaching the strength of the Ruu."

"Hmm. That number puts you around equal to the clans of the north now that they've lost the Suun," Donda Ruu said in a satisfied tone, the light in his eyes burning even brighter. "In that case, I've got a proposal. Now that the forest's edge has lost its leading clan, the ones to lead our people should be the Ruu, Sauti, and the folks from the north."

"What?!" the Zaza clan head exclaimed. "The Ruu, Sauti, and us? What do you mean by that, clan head of the Ruu?!"

"I'd figure that should be obvious. No matter how big the Ruu clan may be, we don't have a long enough reach to cover the ridiculously vast forest's edge from end to end. And since there are already big clans in the north and south, why not put that strength to use?"

"But that's..."

"Three clans leading the forest's edge. By all three of them having bonds with Genos and accepting the reward money, we'll make it medicine rather than a poison. If

anyone has a better plan, then speak it. And I'm not just talking to clans like the Zaza and the Sauti. That applies to every last clan head here."

Donda Ruu's piercing gaze once more glanced around over the clan heads.

"If someday another clan rivaling the Ruu and Sauti appears, then they'll also be acknowledged as being qualified to lead. After all, one leader isn't enough for the forest's edge. With just one, a single man's corruption could sever the future of our people. The Suun clan showed us that through their actions."

Zuuro Suun didn't react in the least. The former leader of his people who had accepted this negative inheritance from the previous clan head and lived a life of laziness now wore the face of a dead man.

"Those of you who agree with my words, rise to your feet! Those of you who object, stay seated and speak your opinion!"

All the clans under the Ruu swiftly stood. The smaller clan heads also started rising one by one, including me and Ai Fa.

The ones who agonized over it till the end were unsurprisingly the clans of the north and south. Just how great must their surprise and bewilderment have been, having the responsibility of leading their people suddenly thrust upon them?

Even so, Dari Sauti eventually stood... and finally, the clan heads of the north joined him.

It was a unanimous decision.

Donda Ruu nodded, a serious expression on his face.

"Here and now, as clan head of the Ruu, I, Donda Ruu, swear to join together with the Sauti, the Zaza, and their groups, to lead our people down the proper path without ever losing our pride as people of the forest's edge."

"As clan head of the Sauti, I, Dari Sauti, also pledge my assistance to the forest's edge."

The clan heads formerly under the Suun stood there indignantly for a bit, but before long the Zaza clan head muttered in a low voice, "From here on out, we'll decide who will lead our clans. But we swear that no matter who it is, they won't bring shame to the people of the forest's edge."

"How sloppy. You all need to hurry up and do your work by deciding on a leader," Donda Ruu said with a wicked grin, to which the Zaza Clan head just said, "Oh, shut it!"

"Well then, aside from the Sauti and let's say the Zaza clan head for now, the rest of you can relax. But there are still some matters that need to be decided..."

We did as we were told and took a seat.

This was entirely Donda Ruu's field now.

"So, how should we handle the members of the main Suun house? I think we should all decide on a path first, and then ask the other clan heads," Donda Ruu stated, causing a tension to fill the air.

"I think... The ones who actually committed crimes that night should be punished, as well as the clan head Zuuro Suun," Dari Sauti soon replied. "The eldest son Diga Suun, the second son Doddoo Suun, the eldest daughter Yamiru Suun, and Tei Suun from the branch families. Adding in the clan head Zuuro Suun, I would say the crimes of these five are readily apparent."

"Hmm. Then you're saying the crime of pillaging the bounty of the forest should fall on Zuuro Suun alone? But the eldest daughter didn't draw any blade, so how should she be punished?"

"That's... a bit of a difficult question, but since she shared her knowledge with her brothers, I believe she should share in their punishment."

Did that mean she would have her right arm cut off like Doddoo and Tei Suun?

I could feel an incredibly bitter taste spreading through my mouth.

However, what the Zaza clan head said next was even

harsher.

"I think all the members of the main house deserve to be punished. The crime of not only laying hands on the bounty of the forest but also compelling the branch houses to do the same is a heavy one. They should all have their scalps peeled."

"Oh? But the women of the main house wouldn't have the power to compel the members of the branch families, would they? Wouldn't it be rather inconsistent to forgive the branch families but force the women of the main house to pay with their lives?"

"Hmm... I have of course thought on the matter, but still... Normally, the members of the branch houses would be punished equally. And so, there's no choice but to have the members of the main house make up for that by shedding their blood."

So he was saying to give even a girl as young as Tsuvai Suun the death penalty? Even if that was what occurred from earnestly following the harsh laws of the forest's edge, I couldn't accept that at all.

"May I say just one thing...?" Yamiru Suun suddenly chimed in. A number of glares full of bloodlust shot her way. "Since you all don't seem to know, allow me to inform you... The corruption of the Suun clan came from the previous clan head, Zattsu Suun." The raw bloodlust from the clan heads grew even thicker. However, the same frozen, hostile expression remained fixed on Yamiru Suun's face as she indifferently continued on. "Zattsu Suun was a man who was like a bundle of poison. Anyone who spent a long period of time with him steadily had their soul rotted away. That man was the clan head until he collapsed with illness ten years ago, and he ate away at the souls of the main house all the while."

"Ha! I was wondering what you were going to say, but I see you're scheming to place all the responsibility on Zattsu Suun, who can't even stand! You truly are despicable!" the

Zaza clan head howled with anger.

Yamiru Suun's expression still didn't shift as she looked his way.

"I didn't say that all responsibility falls on him. I simply wished to state that there are those who weren't tainted by that man's poison... Oura Suun married in 12 years back, Tsvai Suun was born around that time, and Mida Suun was not yet fully aware... Those three did not have their souls rotted by Zattsu Suun, and did not commit any more crimes than the members of the branch families."

Then, while remaining seated, Yamiru Suun bowed so deeply that her forehead touched the floor.

"And so, if you forgive the branch families, then please do the same for those three... We are the only ones who have had our souls rotted away."

"What are you saying?! That doesn't make any sense!" Tsvai Suun wailed, leaping to her feet like a clockwork doll. She hadn't been bound because she was so young.

Ludo Ruu had been assigned to watch her, and he hurriedly grabbed her by the nape of her neck.

"Hey, don't be stupid! Stop moving, you runt!"

"Shut up! You were the one who worried most of all about the Suun clan's future, right, Yamiru?! So why should you have to die?!"

"Because I was unable to think of any other path for us to find salvation," Yamiru Suun replied, looking up and smiling ever so slightly. "I was born before Diga and Doddo. And in turn, I took in even more of Zattsu Suun's poison. My soul has long since rotted beyond any hope of salvation."

"When you were born doesn't matter! I mean... We're family, aren't we?!" The tears steadily started falling from Tsvai Suun's big eyes. Then, still being held by the neck by Ludo Ruu, she glared at her father and brothers. "You're the ones always doing such awful stuff! It's because you're such cowards that Yamiru ended up like this! What's so scary about a bed-ridden old man?! When we got money, why

didn't you use it properly?!"

None of them responded. They just silently hung their heads, as if they still couldn't process the disastrous circumstances they found themselves in.

The clan heads were all looking around at each other, clearly more than a little thrown out of sorts by the proceedings.

The one to finally speak up first was the Zaza clan head.

"It really is difficult to vary punishments based on the size of their crimes, isn't it? In that case, I believe it best we follow the law and punish both the main house and the branch families, every last one of them."

"That's far too hasty. We shouldn't treat the lives of 40 so lightly... What are your thoughts, Donda Ruu?" Dari Sauti asked, only for Donda Ruu to keep silent for a bit.

Then, after glancing over the members of the Suun, he rather slowly opened his mouth.

"For ten years now, I've continued to call into question the crimes of the Suun clan. Stretching back even further, my father has done the same since 20 years prior. The ones who failed to listen to that and kept protecting them were the clans under them, you Zaza and Jeen and the like... If you all hadn't gotten in his way, I'm certain my father would have beheaded Zattsu Suun 20 years ago."

The Zaza clan head bit his lip with regret.

"At this point, I have no response to that... But still, what does that matter?"

"The members of the Suun clan are a rather irredeemable bunch. That eldest and second son in particular are truly despicable scum. But who is it that let our leading clan grow corrupted? Those of you who protected the Suun clan, those of us who failed to bring them to justice, and those small clans who lacked the power to do anything... Would you not say we all share significant blame for that?" There was an unusually calm shine in Donda Ruu's eyes. "I believe it would be alright to give all of the Suun but the previous and

current clan heads, Zattsu and Zuuro Suun, one single chance.”

“A single chance?”

“Yeah. A final opportunity to live and die as people of the forest’s edge... Of course, that’s if the members of the main house have the resolve to accept it.”



As we sat and watched the ritual hall from a distance, we sleepily talked to one another.

“I think I may have misjudged Donda Ruu. I thought he was a lot more hardheaded, like the Zaza clan head or something.”

The conclusion Donda Ruu had voiced was that clans with strength like the Ruu and Zaza would each take in members of the main Suun house. Of course, they weren’t simply having them marry in, though. No, they would have to abandon the Suun name, sever ties with their other family, and help around the house in the lowest position of all.

If they showed they had properly reformed in the process, they could be accepted as part of that clan. If not, they wouldn’t be given a chance to pass on their blood and would simply die off.

It was incredibly harsh, but also a path to salvation that was utterly unprecedented in the history of the forest’s edge.

It wasn’t just the Zaza and Sauti who were unable to hide their bewilderment at the idea, but all the clan heads. And yet, Donda Ruu’s proposal was still ultimately accepted.

“Donda Ruu isn’t the sort of man to value laws and customs so highly. In fact, if I had to say, he’s the sort who thinks a great deal on whether or not such things should take priority over his own thoughts and feelings,” Ai Fa replied, her eyes narrowing either because it was so bright,

or perhaps because she was simply sleepy. “Still, in a way it certainly is a surprise that such a great commotion didn’t result in any blood being shed.”

“Yeah, that really was a relief.”

It still wasn’t determined where everyone would be sent, but as they were seen as dangerous, Diga and Doddo Suun were to enter the Dom clan. Apparently, the Dom were considered to be especially savage, courageous, and prideful even among the clans of the north, and they would be forced to work hard as hunters there.

“That may as well be a death sentence for those fools, though,” Ludo Ruu had quietly whispered to me, and I had nothing to say to that. Still, it had to be a lot better of a deal for them than getting their scalps peeled or having their right arms cut off. I may have been furious enough to kill them last night, but now that I knew Ai Fa was safe, I didn’t actually wish death on them.

However, I absolutely felt that I never wanted to see them again in my life.

“I wonder which clans will get Mida and Yamiru Suun? They’d need to really have their acts together to handle them.”

“Who knows? Perhaps they’ll enter into the Ruu clan?”

Hearing that I gave a dissatisfied, “Huh?” and turned to look, finding Ai Fa’s narrowed eyes shooting me an icy glare.

“Asuta... Just how many women must you see in the nude before you’ll be satisfied?”

“Eh? That’s what you were thinking?! Who would have an interest in that sort of horrifyingly blood-coated nude body?”

“So you would have enjoyed it if there was no blood?”

“That’s not what I meant! And hey, there’s a limit to how much scandalous stuff you can say about a guy! Plus, the only nude woman I’ve laid eyes on in this world is you, Ai Fa!”

An elbow came slamming into my temple. And at that

very moment, a large figure approached.

“What are you two up to? I believe I heard something about nude women...?”

“Oww... Ah, no, it’s nothing. Did something happen, Dari Sauti?”

“No, I just wanted to get a bit of rest, too. There’s a whole mountain of issues that must be settled before I can return to the Sauti settlement, after all.”

Selecting where the members of the main house would end up. Determining what would happen with the branch families. How the blessings of the forest from the pantry would be dealt with. An investigation of the forest that had been pillaged. And also... what punishment Zattsu and Zuuro Suun would face.

“At any rate, we won’t be punishing them immediately. We need to question Zuuro Suun on what sort of exchanges he made with Genos, and as for Zattsu Suun... Well, it seems he won’t be living many more months regardless of how things play out.”

“I see...”

The Suun clan had their authority to lead stripped from them, to be handed over to three other clans in their place. Just how would Genos react to that fact? Unlike the Suun clan, would these prideful clan heads of the forest’s edge be able to forge proper bonds with those who held power?

They certainly had plenty of new trials laid out before them.

“I’ll be counting on you to do your best on that matter, if nothing else.”

“Yeah. The idea that the folks from the castle were bending the laws to cover for the people of the forest’s edge is utterly ridiculous. I’m repulsed by the thought that the townsfolk looked at us like that up until now.” With that, Dari Sauti punched his fist into his other palm. “Attacking travelers, kidnapping women, stealing crops... Did the Suun clan really commit such awful crimes?”

"I don't know. But the members of the branch families lack the energy for such deeds. And so, now that the folks from the main house are no longer able to act freely, if we stop hearing about such things then I suppose that means it was them."

"If that turns out to be true, then I feel we were too light in our punishment of the eldest and second sons... Though, I shouldn't call joining the Dom an especially light punishment."

Was the Dom clan seriously that stern? Well, they didn't talk as much as the Zaza and Jeen, and they wore those giba skulls too, so they certainly were the most frightening of the group.

"Ah, and about that Tei Suun man from the branch families. I intend to propose he also be entrusted to the Dom."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yeah. Apparently, he had been living with the main house because his family members had died out. In that case, it seems fitting to treat him the same as them... Also, apparently he's the father of the clan head's wife, Oura Suun."

I was at a loss for words.

That meant he was Zuuro Suun's father-in-law and Tsuvai Suun's grandfather, didn't it? The members of the main house were seriously treating someone like that as a servant? There really was an unbelievable darkness to that clan, all the way to the bitter end.

"Still... I believe it would be a blessing for him to live out the last days of his life as a hunter. Unlike those older sons of the main house, who lacked any pride as hunters since birth, Tei Suun must have had a time when he hunted properly."

I see. If he was in his fifties, then he must have strove to hunt giba like everyone else back when he was young. And then, he had his pride as a hunter snatched away from him...

How cruel.

Just how must he have felt while following the orders of someone like Diga Suun? What sort of man lurked behind those rotting fish eyes?

As such thoughts raced through my head, I felt a sort of numb pain run through my chest.

“That may have been part of why Donda Ruu brought up the idea of giving them a final chance. It’s frustrating to admit, but it seems that the Zaza clan head and I don’t yet have the same strength as leaders that he possesses,” Dari Sauti stated, and then he turned his back to us. “We must lead our people down the proper path, so that such mistakes and tragedies are never repeated... Well then, I will see you again sometime, Asuta and Ai Fa of the Fa clan.”

“Yeah, see you later,” I replied, while Ai Fa remained silent.

Now that I thought about it, she had been quiet for a while now, and when I turned to look... her head flopped down on my right shoulder. Apparently she had fallen asleep while I was talking to Dari Sauti.

Well, we only got two or three hours of sleep last night at most, so that was no surprise. Then there was that whole commotion on top of things, so everyone was feeling exhausted.

Still... I guess we saw our task through, somehow...

Tomorrow, we would be open for business in the post town once again. And so today, after all this, I would have to make preparations.

If I didn’t let myself rest at least a little, I would never last. Thinking as such, I leaned up against Ai Fa too, and let my heavy eyelids close shut.



Intermezzo: The Silver Vase

A group was traveling quickly across the barren wasteland, heading east to west. With them they had five wagons, each pulled by two tolos. The drivers holding the reins, every last one of them, were dark-skinned men from the Eastern Kingdom of Sym.

They were the merchant group known as the Silver Vase.

Their young leader, Shumiral Zi Sadumtino, was currently seated in the back of the lead wagon, watching out the window as the scenery silently streamed on by.

The sun was already sinking down past the western horizon, its reddish twilight spread across the harsh region, where no one could possibly live.

The earth was parched and cracking. The trees were all withered, and no fruit could ever be expected of them. If you headed farther south, you would find a scorching hot desert even more desolate than this land. And so, this barren land was abandoned by all those greedy folks who lived in cities of stone, making it an unclaimed border zone between nations.

Even the path they were carrying their goods along was no real trail, coated with sand as it was. Without great experience in such matters, it would be easy to get a tolos's foot caught on a chunk of rock that suddenly jutted up, or ram a wagon's wheel into one, and suddenly find yourself unable to keep going.

These were skilled travelers, though. Once a year, the Silver Vase crossed this inhospitable path in a long journey to the Western Kingdom of Selva.

When traveling from Sym to Selva, there were only two roughly defined paths. You either slipped past the Northern

Kingdom of Mahyudra while following the borders between nations, or you passed through this barren unclaimed region to the south.

The path to the north was properly maintained, but a great number of bandits prowled the area. To the south there was rarely anyone to trouble you, but nature itself acted against you. In terms of overall danger, there really wasn't much of a difference. But ever since their previous leader formed the Silver Vase, they had been pitting themselves against nature rather than bandits.

However, even in this barren land, it wasn't as if there were no brigands whatsoever. And for the first time in a while, they soon ended up experiencing that fact.

"Shumiral," the youth holding the reins called out.

"Right," Shumiral responded, leaning towards him.

There were a number of shadowy figures heading their way, the half-set blazing sun behind them.

It was a group of bandits riding totos. There looked to be around ten of them in total, and a number of them were holding up glimmering silver swords.

Since they were coming from the direction the group was traveling, running away simply wouldn't prove possible. They wouldn't be able to shake off the bandits while their totos were pulling such heavy luggage anyway, though. After a mere moment of thinking, Shumiral gave his comrades the signal to stop the wagons.

"Well then, you sure are some awful understanding traders. If you keep on behaving yourselves, then we'll let you escape with your lives."

The bandits spread out, encircling the five wagons. One especially large man from the group then approached, holding a blade. He was a westerner, with wavy, dark brown hair. His vest and battle skirt looked a bit dirty, and there was a flask and cloth bag hanging from his leather belt. Perhaps he was a former mercenary, as he also seemed rather skilled at handling his totos.

Shumiral stood up next to the driver's seat, facing the man who appeared to be the bandit leader.

"Did you all, come from, the north?"

"Huh? Do we look like we're from Mahyudra? You all are the ones with ties to those savages."

"That's not, what I meant. I understand, you are people, of the west. I am simply, asking if you came, from further north than here."

"I don't get you at all! Well, I suppose it's pretty good by Sym standards to be able to talk the western language at all!" the man sneered, and his followers joined in with vulgar laughs.

Shumiral just stared expressionlessly back at him.

"Your skin, is burned, red. Therefore, I believe, you must have come from the south, quite recently. Westerners born to, the south, have more, tan skin."

"What of it? If you're trying to buy time, you should know that guards don't come way out here."

"Very few bandits, attack the people of Sym, in this region. There are, ten of us. There are, ten of you as well. Normally, we tend, to avoid bandits."

"Eh...? What are you going on about?"

"You need five, for each man of Sym, you attack. You needed, 50 men."

In the very instant that Shumiral made that statement, the bandit leader bent backwards with a "Gyah!" He then fell to the ground, and the long-necked totos tilted its head, having lost its master.

"B-Boss? What in the world's going on?!"

"What did you bastards do?!"

The remaining bandits took up their weapons, clearly enraged.

Seeing that out of the corner of his eyes, Shumiral calmly stated, "The men of Sym, are not, powerless."

Three more of the men fell from their totos, one after another.

Shumiral's comrades had launched an attack using blowguns. And all of the darts they fired were coated in a powerful paralyzing agent known as banagiuz.

"Six of you, remain. Will you abandon, this robbery?" Shumiral calmly asked. "It is dangerous, for all of you, to lose consciousness. You would be out here, as night comes, no one to save you. You could not, avoid death."

Another of the men fell.

The remaining half of the men fell into a panic.

"T-These guys are Sym shamans!"

"Get too close, and you'll get cursed!"

The people of the west and south feared the people of the east, who were skilled at using medicinal and poisonous herbs, as shamans and sorcerers. And it seemed these men had at last remembered those rumors.

"We do not wish, to kill, anyone. Please give up, on your robbery, and leave, with your comrades," Shumiral called out, as the remaining bandits looked ready to flee at any moment. When someone was hit with banagiuz they were left unable to move for half a day, so at this rate those five would be left defenseless as night fell. "I pray, you live proper lives, from now on. Your god, watches over you, always."

The men's faces went pale, and they moved to rescue their fallen comrades, staying cautious of any moves from Shumiral's group all the while. Then, they gathered the stray totos and fled to the north as quickly as they could.

"Well then, let's get going."

With that signal from Shumiral, the five wagons once again started to advance.

The young driver turned to Shumiral while holding the reins and said, "There are, many bandits, among the people, of the west. Why can they not, live proper lives?"

The members of the Silver Vase had a habit of using their mother tongue as little as possible so that they could efficiently practice the language of the west.

“They likely, have no place, to work. Having no choice, they decide to live, through theft.”

“The western kingdom, is more vast, than the eastern nation. And yet, there is, no work?”

“Yes. Perhaps that is why, struggles over land, never cease.”

The Western Kingdom of Selva had been involved in land disputes with the Northern Kingdom of Mahyudra since ancient times.

The Eastern Kingdom of Sym hadn't reached peace with the Southern Kingdom of Jagar either, though. Shumiral and his band had been born in grasslands far from the nation's borders, so it felt utterly detached from them, but even now the two nations fought one another.

“We have, wasted time... Let us hurry on.”

They kept on moving along quickly, heading towards the almost-set sun.

There were less than five days left till they would reach the frontier town of Genos, which acted as the gate to the Eastern Kingdom of Selva.



A while after they drove off the bandits, the curtain of darkness finally started to descend, only for them to spy the light of a camp in the distance.

It looked to be a rather large bonfire. It wasn't especially rare to run into other travelers even in this barren land, but the scale was certainly a bit unusual.

“What is that? A merchant group, from the west?”

Rather than answering his comrade's question, Shumiral peered ahead through the darkness. There appeared to be a large number of people preparing for dinner. It seemed there were a lot more than just ten or twenty of them, though.

“Please, slow your speed. Let us avoid, provoking them.”

Shumiral had a certain premonition at the moment. And

before too long, they found out that he was absolutely correct.

When a man standing by the bonfire noticed Shumiral's group, he angrily yelled out, "You bastards are from the east, aren't you?! What do you want with us?!"

The man had dark brown hair and green eyes, his skin was pale with a bit of reddishness to it, and he was short and stout. That marked him as coming from the Southern Kingdom of Jagar.

Hearing the man's voice, a number of new figures emerged from the shadows, all holding spears longer than they were tall.

"We are, the merchant group, the Silver Vase. We are heading, to the western town, of Genos."

This was an unclaimed region. Citizens of any nation were free to step foot in the place, and none of the laws of the kingdoms applied. And so, it was very dangerous when people of the enemy nations of Sym and Jagar happened to run into one another.

On top of that, it seemed like there had to be around 100 people on the Jagar side. If it came down to battle, it would be difficult to manage with the poison darts like before.

"A merchant group, you say? Ha! So you'd go so far as to pass through this annoying frontier region to sell your goods, huh? I'm amazed by how greedy you lot are, at least!" the man who yelled at first replied, his voice dripping with open animosity. "However, this is our settlement! We won't let folks from the east do as they please! Go ahead and ask your dark-faced god whether you should leave right away or if you want a fight!"

"We have no intention, of fighting. We simply wish, to head west."

"Then go around our settlement! If you take one step into the light of our fire, though, we'll take it as an act of aggression!"

There was no reason for such intimidation here in this

unclaimed territory. Rather than foolishly try to debate the hotheaded men from Jagar, though, Shumiral instead pointed his totes north.

They then moved along the outskirts of the light in a large arc, taking a significant detour while heading west. All the while, the men from Jagar kept their gazes and spears fixed on the group.

"Shumiral, there are a number, of houses, in the middle," one of his comrades whispered. "They must have built, a settlement, at some point. When we took this same path, half a year ago, it was not there."

"Yes. So they must have built it, in this past half year."

"But why? Jagar land, is far south, of the desert. This region is full, of bandits, poisonous insects, man-eating lizards, and other dangers... And the land itself, is wasting away."

"Yes. But still, I believe there was, an oasis, in this area. With time, it would be possible, to cultivate fields."

That was precisely why Shumiral's group had planned to use the area to make camp for the night.

"They must have been driven, from their land. And so, they chose this region, to build a new home."

"Then our journey, will be more difficult, than ever before."

If they built a fortress or the like, it would certainly become incredibly hard for folks from Sym to pass through the region. However, it hadn't felt quite that dangerous to Shumiral.

"It would be dangerous, if they built a fort. But they do not, have the strength needed, for such a thing. For now, a bit of a detour, is fine."

Around a hundred people had gone and built a settlement in the middle of a barren wasteland. It was clear as day just how difficult of a task that must be. It was hard to imagine them having enough leeway to construct a fortress on top of that. In fact, they likely needed the protection of

their god just to make it through each and every day.

Still, their circumstances must have forced them to choose to live such lives. Perhaps their home had been taken in the war with the east. Thinking of it that way, it all fell to Sym's discretion.

"Let us move away, enough that we, cannot see their bonfire. Both sides, will feel at ease, then."

They silently continued onward, their path lit by their torches. But considering it was such a barren wasteland with nothing around in terms of coverage, it took half an hour of having their tolos run before the light of the settlement was no longer visible.

"This should be enough. This place, shall be where, we camp," Shumiral stated, having the wagons stop in the shadow of a massive rock that jutted out like the jaw of a beast.

The tolos were separated from the wagons, then their reins were held in place by pounding metal stakes into the ground. The wagons were placed in a circle surrounding them, and they lit a fire in the center. As each of the ten members of the group smoothly carried out their assigned tasks, the camp was ready in no time at all.

"We were unable, to replenish, our water. We should use, as little, as possible."

Shumiral's comrades, who had been moving to start preparing dinner, all gave a small nod.

They were scheduled to reach the next spring around when the sun hit its peak tomorrow, but if something was wrong there as well, then their lives would actually be in danger. And so, it was a sensible decision to moderate now while they had enough leeway to do so.

They set up four stone pedestals around the bonfire, and placed a large metal pot atop each one. They added a moderate amount of water to those, and then tossed in three different ingredients: gyama meat jerky, dried aria, and minsu beans.

Gyama were a type of creature that lived all throughout Sym. Aria was a highly nutritious vegetable eaten not only in Sym, but also Selva and Jagar. And minsu were a sort of bean harvested from the Sym grasslands.

In Selva and Jagar, people primarily ate fuwano and poitan for their grains, but the central region of Sym mostly ate minsu beans. These minsu beans had been dried out so they wouldn't go bad, but they became soft once again when boiled in water. When camping out, it was normal for travelers from Sym to heat these ingredients along with chitt seeds, to add some spice.

"Here, Shumiral," one of the group said, handing his leader the first plate of the completed dish.

Shumiral was seated atop a rug, and after saying his thanks and accepting the dish, he started by sipping the broth with his spoon. The crushed chitt had dyed it red, making for a spicy broth. The salt from the gyama jerky also acted as an accompaniment to the flavor. And since they were preserving water, they went heavier than usual on the seasoning.

Biting into the jerky filled his mouth with an even stronger salty taste.

When his tongue started feeling worn down, he wet his mouth with sour fermented gyama milk rather than water.

After a day of swaying about in the wagon, he could at last feel some proper nourishment spreading throughout his body.

However, the ingredients prioritized preservation above all else for the sake of traveling, so it would be overly generous to call them truly delicious. The meat was tough enough that it was like biting into tree bark, and obviously aria and minsu were a lot tastier fresh. If it weren't for the satisfaction of finally getting some nutrition, he likely wouldn't have enjoyed eating it very much.

"I anxiously await our arrival in Genos," a voice from beside him called out in his mother tongue. It had come

from their youngest member, who had only just recently joined the Silver Vase and still couldn't speak in the western tongue. *"You really do grow rather weary of eating like this after a month of it. I am a man of the east, but I have started to feel a yearning for kimyuus meat and mamaria fruit wine."*

"Yes. I feel much the same way," Shumiral replied in the mother tongue as well, prompting the youth to excitedly lean forward.

"But despite Genos being a well-off town, many shops there serve rather crude dishes. Don't you think you could get higher-class food from a shop in the castle town, though?"

"I couldn't say. I've never eaten in the castle town, so I'm not really sure."

"The castle town and post town of Genos are almost like entirely separate nations. The only place for lodgings is the post town, but for a snack, the castle town would be—"

"Hey," another of their comrades interjected. It was the vice-captain of the group, Radajid Gi Nafassiar. *"It doesn't especially matter, but you're letting too much emotion show. You should be a bit more discreet."*

"Really? I thought I was, though..." the youth responded, rubbing his own cheeks with his palms.

Radajid silently shook his head.

"Your expression didn't shift, but your emotions leaked through in your conduct and manner of speaking. Sym watches over everything, you know."

It was considered shameful for a person of Sym to let their emotions show openly.

The youth readjusted how he was sitting, straightening out his back.

"Also, we are heading to Selva in order to earn a fortune. We should bring our earnings back to Sym, not spend them frivolously. The idea of buying food from the castle town is simply absurd."

"Yes, I realize that... But a lot of the dishes served in the post town are so dull, aren't they? They use lots of meat and vegetables, but they still feel lacking somehow."

"The people of the west don't use herbs as much as we do. And they have nothing but salt for adding flavor, so it's only natural that their cooking tastes rather bland," Radajid stated, holding up his own plate high. *"But still, it's better than sipping soup made with shriveled up aria and minsu. If you find the taste lacking, then you can always add your own chitt seeds."*

"That's certainly true," the youth agreed.

The path they had taken thus far had exhausted even their veteran group. To make it from Sym land all the way to Genos took roughly two months by tolos. And after the first month, they had to just keep running on through this barren land, with no trace of any other people about. That meant there was no chance of picking up any new food supplies, so they had no choice but to eat their preserved rations.

But in a mere five days, that harsh journey would finally be at an end.

Once they reached their initial destination of Genos, they would then simply walk from town to town, and would hardly ever have to spend the night outdoors. They would spend several months traveling throughout the western kingdom, selling goods from their native land. That was the life led by Shumiral's group, the Silver Vase.

It would be nearly a year before they returned back home to Sym. The time they spent traveling really was far greater than what they spent in their home country.

A great many of those born in the nation of Sym, especially those from the peaceful grasslands, chose to live their lives wandering about as such. There were quite a few who didn't even form a merchant group like Shumiral and company, but still traveled to Selva or Mahyudra either alone or in a small group. It seemed traveling about as if blown by the wind, never stopping in one place, suited the

nature of those who came from the grasslands.

What sort of encounters await me on this trip? Shumiral thought to himself, placing his now empty plate atop the rug.

The majority of his comrades seemed to have also finished their meager meals.

“Well then, shall we rest? Those of you on night watch, pay careful attention to the east. There is no guarantee those people of Jagar from before won’t attack.”

With that, the night wore just as silently on as it had the day before.



Four days had passed since then.

With just a day left till they reached Genos, there was at last a change in the desolate landscape.

“I can see, Mount Morga now,” the man holding the reins called out, his voice showing just a bit of emotion.

A massive, dark green forest had come into view off to the distance in the west.

That was Morga, an uninhabited mountain wrapped in all sorts of legends.

Officially, Mount Morga belonged to the Western Kingdom of Selva. However, it wasn’t permitted for people to set foot on the mountain. It was said that varb wolves, giant madarama snakes, and other such vicious beasts lived there, and if the mountain was disturbed they could destroy the nearby town.

However, there was an exception to that rule in the form of a settlement at the base of the mountain. They were the so-called people of the forest’s edge, hunters who had abandoned the god Jagar in favor of Selva.

There were a great many mysteries surrounding the people of the forest’s edge, too.

It was said they were a clan that resulted from the mixing

of Sym and Jagar blood in ancient times, but that was little more than a single rumor. For a long period of time they lived in the nameless black forest of Jagar, avoiding all contact with the outside world. They hunted vicious man-eating black apes and ran about the forest wearing their pelts, but little else was known about the tribe.

But when the black forest burnt down as a result of war 80 years ago, they lost their home.

Without any permission from the pioneers or soldiers of Jagar, the whole tribe moved to the base of Mount Morgia. Gods were meant to be revered over all else, but they traded out the one they worshiped and came to live in the west.

Apparently, the people of the forest's edge didn't see themselves as citizens of any of the four great kingdoms. Instead, their god was the forest. That was why they didn't hesitate in the least to discard the southern god and take up the western one.

Many feared the people of the forest's edge. And on top of that, they were a people worthy of that fear.

When they came to live at the base of Mount Morgia, they displayed their frightening level of skill to the townsfolk by hunting the vicious giba that were seen at the time as a symbol of calamity in Genos. They came to eat giba meat, and sell their horns and tusks to make a living. And from the townsfolk's point of view, by taking the giba's strength into themselves, they only grew more viciously strong.

And that mountain with so many legends surrounding it had now come into view.

The town of Genos existed to the west beyond Mount Morgia.

A day and a half from now, they would pass around the south of the mountain and see a civilized, flourishing nation again for the first time in a month.

"Keep your, guards up."

"Right."

As they continued down their trailless path, their

surroundings shifted steadily into yellowish rocks. It seemed that somehow, the air had grown rather humid.

Then after half a day of running their tolos, they finally saw the majestic Mount Morga up close as the sun began sinking to the west.

After resting once more and then getting their tolos moving first thing in the morning, they would at last arrive at Genos before the sun next started to set. That was the thought running through Shumiral's mind as he gave the signal to stop the wagons.

It was then that one of his comrades hopped out of his wagon and approached.

"Shumiral, the stars, have shifted."

This man was the oldest member of the Silver Vase, having been a part of the group since Shumiral's father led it, and he was exceptionally skilled at reading the stars.

"How exactly, have the stars, moved?"

"Yes, well... The red star of disaster, is now standing, in our way. This night, will surely, prove dangerous," the fortune teller stated in a low voice, raising his right arm. His bony finger pointed out towards the dark forest. "Disaster shall visit, from the north mountain. Starving tusks, red anger... Very dangerous."

"Starving tusks... We will be attacked, by a giba?"

It was always possible a starving giba would leave the forest to attack the fields of Genos. Even the gallant hunters of the forest's edge couldn't possibly wipe out all of the giba throughout the vast forest at the mountain's base.

However, there were almost never any tales of travelers running into giba along the highway and being attacked. The beasts preferred fruits and vegetables to meat, and also tended to avoid humans.

"I do not know. But leaving, Mount Morga, to the north, is dangerous."

Shumiral and company were trying to pass to the south of Mount Morga, so naturally the forest stood imposingly to

the north of them. If their current position was dangerous, then their only options were to turn around or continue on.

"I see. There should be, farms to, the south. Are they, also dangerous?"

"They are. I see, no survivable path, to the south."

However, the world was already awash in twilight. Whether they advanced or retreated, night would fall before they made it halfway to safety. And no matter how skilled they may be at handling their totos, a forced march at night was far too dangerous.

"Understood. Well then..." Shumiral started to say, only for a repulsive roar to sound out from the north. It was the distant howl of some beast, so deep that it was as if the earth itself was trembling.

As if in response, a similar howl sounded out from a different direction.

It was a truly terrifying sound, like a god of calamity had been released from an ancient seal and let out a delighted war cry.

"That is, the howl, of a giba. 20 years ago, I heard, that same cry," Shumiral's comrade uttered, then he returned to his wagon.

There was no longer a moment to spare. And so, Shumiral gave his men the signal to advance.

In that instant, a beast leapt forth from the shadows of the rocks to the north.

Without delay, his comrades fired their poison darts. The creature let out a dull yelp, then collapsed atop the rock.

Its torso was swollen, but its limbs were skinny. It had large diamond-shaped ears, a smooshed snout... And its pale sand-colored fur was short and awkwardly covered its body, which was around the size of a human child.

It wasn't a giba, but a carrion-eating mundt. They were dangerous beasts that lived at the base of the mountain, scavenging about the forest for corpses to feast upon.

Did this mundt hear the giba's cry and flee the forest in

fear? Shumiral thought to himself, only for several more figures to leap forth from the shadows.

The lights of red eyes shined through the darkness. It was a group of mundt, six in total.

"Advance!" Shumiral yelled while grabbing the leather lash from his comrade and giving the tolos a smack on the rear with it.

Normally, mundt didn't go after live prey, but they would do so when starving. So in a way, the situation they found themselves in now was no less dangerous than if it had really been a giba.

However, the mundt's weak limbs couldn't carry them anywhere near as quickly as a giba. With the leg strength of their tolos to aid them it would definitely be possible to get away, even pulling their load behind them.

"Let me, drive. Please, prepare flames," Shumiral said while taking the reins from his comrade.

"Prepare flames?" the man questioned while yielding the driver's seat.

"Yes, that's correct. Please prepare, two torches. We will run the tolos, until the danger, is gone."

"But the sun will be setting soon, will it not?" the man asked, feeling pressured enough to stop using the western tongue. But as his comrade spoke in the mother tongue, Shumiral disappeared into the wagon.

"That is why, we need, the torches. Please, tell the others."

If his old comrade's reading of the stars was correct, they wouldn't escape this threat until they reached the western side of Mount Morga. And it felt a lot safer running the tolos through the night than camping out while under threat of giba and mundt attacks.

Things like this do happen when you continue to travel.

Shumiral and company had made it through far more disastrous circumstances numerous times in the past. And so, he spurred the tolos on with hope in his heart rather than

despair.



Morning had arrived. In the end, Shumiral and company had kept moving past the south of Mount Morga without sleep or rest, until they at last made it to Genos.

Soon after making it past the base of Mount Morga, they ran into a stone highway. It was a wide path, running from north to south as far as the eye could see. There were thriving fields off to the left, while the Morga mountain range lay off to the right, and not too far up the road there were wooden buildings on either side.

That was the Genos post town.

As the sun steadily rose in the sky, the town greeted Shumiral's group, looking just the same as always.

"Is everyone, alright?" Shumiral asked, turning back to look over his comrades after getting down from his wagon near the entrance to town.

One by one, the other men stepped out of the other four wagon onto the stone highway.

They unsurprisingly couldn't hide their fatigue, but none of them were shaken with emotion. Within the group, the especially large vice-captain Radajid spoke up.

"We arrived, half a day earlier, than planned. What shall we, do now?"

"Let us head, to the inn. After we finish preparing, we will take today, off from business."

It was forbidden to ride totos in the post town. And so, Shumiral and company led the large birds by their reins as they set foot into Genos.

There was still some time till the sun would hit its peak, so there weren't all that many people around, unsurprisingly. Even so, a number of inns were open for business, and there were women with baskets full of dirty goods to be cleaned and tradesmen going door to door to be seen here and

there.

It was such a peaceful sight that it made the madness of the day prior seem unreal.

Genos was far from the enemy nation of Mahyudra, and was blessed with both great prosperity and little significant strife. On top of that, it was protected by sturdy-looking guards. After all, being the most prosperous town in the region meant they had to be especially on guard for attacks by bandits.

This post town and the surrounding farms in particular also lacked any walls to ward off enemies from outside, so there were guards patrolling both day and night. While this land was as far from the western capital as it could be, it was still a cornerstone of commerce.

Originally, though, this place was abandoned.

A bit over 200 years prior, this land was also part of the unclaimed territory. Apparently, back then there were only a few hundred people of the west barely scraping by harvesting aria and poitan and the like.

However, the large river flowing from Morga in this land had been hidden from view. Once it was discovered, a mass of pioneers were dispatched from other regions to live here, and in no time at all Genos castle was constructed.

After that, the highway was built, vast farmland started to stretch out to the north and south of the castle, and people began flowing in from all over. And by the time a hundred years had passed, there was a town here that was shockingly massive for one located out on the frontier.

Once another hundred years passed, Genos had become a lynchpin of commerce.

Nowadays, many merchants from Sym and Jagar visited the town, bringing even more energy and fortune to the place. And since it was forbidden for folks from Sym and Jagar to quarrel here, it made Genos a rare place where citizens of the two nations could coexist.

Thanks to that, Shumiral had a great fondness for Genos.

To peaceful folks born on the plains like Shumiral and company, this place had an especially comfortable air about it.

Even when folks from the east like them walked throughout town, no one gave them so much as a questioning glance. People from Jagar may shoot them an unfriendly glare if they crossed paths, but that would be the most that could happen.

“Shumiral,” a voice suddenly called out from diagonally behind him.

Turning around, he found Radajid looking in an unexpected direction.

Following the man’s gaze, Shumiral spied three people on a small path to the east. They were women with dark brown hair and slightly dark skin, wearing cloth with swirling patterns and transparent shawls around their slender bodies... They were women of the forest’s edge.

One was elderly, while the other two were young.

All of them wore calm yet resolute expressions. There was nothing all that strange about the residents of the base of Mount Morga, but they somehow had the mysterious feel of wild beasts about them.

And though the townsfolk didn’t care at all about Shumiral and company, it was almost palpable how uneasy they felt now. Shumiral’s group was made up of foreigners, but somehow, the people of the forest’s edge were looked at even more like outsiders here in this western territory. And though they weren’t hunters, that was no less true for these women.

The women of the forest’s edge swiftly hurried off to the north and disappeared from view.

They must have been going to purchase food from one of the many stalls. As they were forbidden from gathering the blessings of the forest, they needed to frequently visit the post town to buy ingredients in exchange for horns and pelts and the like.

However, Shumiral and company felt no need to avoid the people of the forest's edge.

The people of the west may have seen them as difficult to understand, and folks from the south saw them as traitors who abandoned the southern god, but those from the east had no reason to quarrel with them. And since the people of the east treated the grasslands, mountains, and sky as gods, worshiping the forest as one didn't seem odd in the least.

But it isn't wise to approach them excessively when you wish to continue doing business in Genos... Shumiral thought to himself as he set foot on a path to the west. Following it according to what he remembered, a familiar sign soon came into view.

It marked the small inn known as The Sledgehammer where Shumiral and company always stayed.

"Long time no see, sir."

"Ah, if it isn't the Silver Vase... So it's already the season for you all to be visiting, huh?"

The inn's owner then brought his fingers together in a Sym-style greeting. His name was Nail, and despite being a citizen of the west, he had an unusually strong interest in the culture of the eastern kingdom.

"Ten again this time, is it? And how long will you be staying?"

"We were thinking, until the end, of the blue month. Do you have, rooms open?"

"Fortunately for you, we just had a whole group leave this morning. Shall I prepare two large rooms for you?"

"Thank you. Can you take, our luggage?"

"Of course. Please, come this way."

Nail then led him out of the inn to a building around back. The inn itself was small, but thanks to this large locked storehouse, it proved quite convenient for the Silver Vase, what with all the luggage they brought with them.

Shumiral then turned to face his comrades as they moved the totes and five wagons in front of the storehouse.

"Before resting our bodies, let us carry out the preparations for doing business tomorrow. Radajid, get permission to open a stall, and also confirm that our permit to enter the castle town is still valid," Shumiral stated, giving his orders in their mother tongue for the sake of their young comrade who still wasn't skilled with the language of the west. *"And on the way there, entrust the totos to a stable. Five of you are to accompany Radajid. The other three are to remain here with me to organize our goods."*

"Understood."

Radajid's group of six then left the storehouse, taking the ten totos along with them.

Meanwhile, Shumiral and the other three who stayed set about separating the goods that would be sold in the post town from those meant for the castle town.

Considering they had five wagons' worth, it made for an enormous amount of luggage. Consequently, even though it had been roughly sorted in advance, it still was no easy task. Plus, their stamina was just about at its limit.

"Shumiral, is this cooking knife, meant for, the castle town?"

"Yes. Sym blades, would not sell, in the post town."

Thanks to how precious Sym metal was, blades made from it were quite expensive. And despite Genos's prosperity, there was a surprising gap between the state of the post town and castle town. Similarly, silverwork accessories were meant for the castle town, while those made with gyama horns and stones were for the post town.

I suppose that does it...

After around half an hour, Shumiral's group at last finished sorting their goods, and they exited the storehouse together. He then shut the thick wooden door and set the steel lock.

Surely nobody would ever think goods meant to be sold in the castle town were stowed away here in a storehouse in the post town. Even so, they made sure to set traps using

poisonous herbs in their wagons, as a precaution against thieves. If anyone was foolish enough to touch them without permission from the owners, they would end up sleeping for half a day from the banagiuz.

Satisfied with their work, Shumiral then returned to The Sledgehammer.

The owner Nail had returned to the reception desk, and he gave a Sym-like expressionless nod.

“Welcome back. Will you be resting in your room now?”

“Yes. But before that, let us undertake, our first bit of business.”

With Shumiral’s signal, one of his comrades placed a large cloth bundle atop the reception desk.

Nail instantly broke out in a smile, but then he hurriedly restrained himself. After all, he was trying to incorporate the Sym custom of not showing emotion into his own lifestyle.

“Much of the food, is arranged to, be sold to the nobles, of the castle town. And so, there is only, a little here. My deepest, apologies.”

“No, this is plenty enough for me, both in terms of quantity and quality.”

The bundle was packed with all sorts of ingredients from Sym, such as chitt seeds. Thanks to that, Shumiral’s group was able to experience Sym-style cuisine at this inn, too.

However, it most certainly *wasn’t* enough in terms of quality or quantity. Nail was clearly happy, but ultimately high-class herbs and ingredients just wouldn’t sell in the post town.

Just the fact that there was plenty of meat and vegetables to be had seemed to be more than enough to satisfy appetites here in the post town. In a way, it could be said that gave them more prosperous eating habits than other towns, but since folks from the east preferred strong seasonings, something definitely felt lacking.

But with that said, they couldn’t just go and place the goods they brought all the way from Sym at bargain prices.

The same would also be true for merchants from Jagar. And so, such expensive ingredients all had to be sold in the castle town.

The people of the post town certainly do live lives of plenty. Especially when it comes to frontier regions, I can't think of another town where everyone can eat as much karon and kimyuus as they please... But inside those stone walls, the nobles are living in far greater luxury.

People from the post town were not permitted to step foot in the castle town. And so, they had no idea just how the nobles were living off the fortunes they earned.

On the other hand, Shumiral happened into the opportunity to form a bond with a noble of Genos, and was able to get hold of a permit. It was the lowest form of permit, as it didn't allow them to spend the night, but it was still more than enough to learn what life was like inside the stone walls.

Such gaps don't exist within a single town in Sym. And Genos also fears the people of the forest's edge as savages, as well. Surely such unique towns are rare even throughout the western domain.

Shumiral and company were fond of Genos. But because of that, they were more than a little concerned with the strange feeling and customs hanging about the town.

Something was ever so slightly warped about the place. Would the day eventually come when this distortion would be corrected...? Would this town be able to obtain a more equal happiness for all? Shumiral couldn't help but hold such concerns in the corner of his mind.

Well, I suppose nothing will ever come of a foreigner like me worrying about such matters... Shumiral thought to himself, at which point the door to the inn suddenly swung wide open.

When he turned to look, he found his six comrades who had headed into town standing there.

"What is it? It isn't good to act so wildly."

Since the youngest of the group was standing at the head, Shumiral used their mother tongue.

The youth replied, *"My apologies,"* as he approached Shumiral. His expression remained calm, but there was a clear excitement shining in his black eyes.

There looked to be an ever so slight bit of emotion showing from Radajid and the others, too.

"Was there some sort of issue? Is the permit no longer valid...?"

The Silver Vase had been granted the permit in the name of a noble, so if that person had fallen from power, it would no longer prove effective.

However, the youth shook his head and said, *"There was no issue."*

"Then why have you all lost your composure? Especially you, Radajid. This isn't like you at all."

"I've lost my composure? How shameful."

Naturally, it was slight enough of a change that a westerner like Nail couldn't pick up on it, but it was impossible to hide from Shumiral, who was their close comrade. Despite their calm expressions, they were all clearly out of sorts.

"The thing is, we tasted some shocking cooking," the youth stated. *"I never imagined I would find such a dish here in the Genos post town."*

"You ate food from a stall? That certainly sounds promising. But I'm exhausted from last night, and I don't feel like eating anything at the moment," Shumiral replied while feeling a bit astounded at what he was hearing, only for the youth to shake his head again.

"Then please, eat it tomorrow. It is a truly surprising dish. And apparently, it is made with giba meat."

"Giba meat? But from what I hear, only the people of the forest's edge eat that."

"Yes, it is a man of the forest's edge who is selling it... However, despite him wearing their clothing, he really did

look like a person of the west to me."

Shumiral was left at a loss for words.

A westerner clad in the garb of the forest's edge was selling giba cooking from a stall in Genos...? Was such a thing really possible?

"If that is true, then I certainly would like to try it."

"Yes, please do so. Then, you're sure to be just as surprised as we were."

As he silently stared back at his comrades, Shumiral felt a mysterious excitement building up inside. Perhaps the god of the east or west had made him tremble as a premonition of the coming change that would visit Genos.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the sixth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

Time certainly flies, as it has already been over a year since the release of the first volume.

As I write this afterword, it's already nearing the end of February, but I wish you all the best in this new year.

Now then, this is the sixth volume. This time around, we get away from Asuta's business in the post town and focus again on the settlement at the forest's edge.

At last, it's time to directly confront the root of what is wrong there: the Suun clan.

There may be some of you who read the afterword before the book, so I would like to avoid spoilers, but I think the feel this time is a bit different than in the last volume, where business was still ramping up in the post town. But Asuta and Ai Fa's goals remain the same, so I hope you look forward to seeing them overcome various challenges as they try to push forwards toward a bright future.

Now that I think of it, the main heroine of the story had been missing from the front cover for both the fourth and fifth volumes. But now, she finally gets to smile, too.

Also, each time there's a new volume it means a chance for new character designs, but this time it ended up being all men. On top of that, there were six of them. That makes this the most since the very first volume! As the author I had strongly been pushing for three of them in particular to get designs, so I'm truly grateful for that.

It would be spoilers to say any more, so I won't specify who I'm talking about, but they were drawn as a single set. I still haven't revealed their names, but they were like a

symbol of the volume, so I really wanted them to get drawn. And in a way, they ended up looking even more frightening than Donda Ruu. When the initial rough sketches were delivered, it was even more impactful than I had expected.

Let me just formally state that it made me truly appreciate once again that Kochimo was assigned as my illustrator.

As for the intermezzo for this volume, I decided to focus on the easterner Shumiral, who wasn't actually introduced this volume. At first I wanted to do something with a certain charming daughter's day-to-day life to contrast the serious nature of the main book, but then I realized it wasn't a proper fit. Still, Shumiral was one of my favorites, so I hope you enjoyed it.

Now then... Next time, Asuta and company will face even more turmoil as he resumes business in the post town, and Kamyua Yoshu will appear yet again after being quiet for a while.

As the author, I'll keep pushing onwards in the hope that you all are looking forward to what comes next.

Now then... As always, let me finish by giving thanks to my editor at Hobby Japan, my illustrator Kochimo, everyone else involved with the production of this book, and of course all of you who purchased it.

I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

EDA, February 2016



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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 6
by EDA

Translated by Matthew Warner
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Original Japanese edition published in 2016 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

English translation © 2020 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: February 2020

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

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Illust: Kochimo

VOLUME
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